

THE EVOLUTION OF MEDIA COVERAGE IN PROFESSIONAL AND
COLLEGIATE ESPORTS

A THESIS

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BY

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ABSTRACT

THESIS: The Evolution of Media Coverage in Professional and Collegiate eSports

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My thesis research is a comprehensive project looking at the evolution of media coverage in professional and collegiate eSports. Using the methodology of participant observation and interviewing allowed me to find commonalities between the answers of subjects and the data given by other research on the media coverage of eSporting events. I used a theoretical approach tailored toward media management and political economy to demonstrate how the understanding of economics in eSports can further change the media coverage of eSporting events. Media management, while primarily concerned with legacy media, is a theory with the potential to explain the changes eSports is bringing to sports media coverage. The overarching purpose of my thesis is to understand how both professional and collegiate sports coverage emerged from, and responds to, the social practice of eSports, and turns that coverage into a viable form of commercial media.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to the media who cover eSports and how they are evolving the industry. The opportunity for the media to enhance the eSports industry is quickly advancing. The ever-changing atmosphere of eSports and the growth of online, linear broadcasting, and over the top content opens the door for those interested in eSports media more than ever.

I also dedicate my thesis to my parents, Jack and Theresa Tidrow for standing by me throughout my six years at Ball State. Without them I would not be able to pursue my passions. To my fiancé, Gabrielle Glass, for pushing me every day to chase my passions and for her love and support. To my advisor Robert Brookey, who continuously offered his insight and talents to keep my thesis as strong as possible. To my other two committee members Suzy Smith and Mike Dalgety, their support and willingness to provide their knowledge. Lastly, I dedicate this project to the directors of Ball State Sports Link: Chris Taylor, Alex Kartman, and Brad Dailey. Without them, graduate school would not have been a possibility and each one was instrumental in this process.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and History

On July 28, 2019 eSports mega company Epic Games handed out a record-shattering 30 million dollars to contestants of the Fortnite World Cup Finals (Gonzalez, 2019). The winner, Kyle “Bugha” Giersdor, pocketed three million dollars for winning the event. While the dollar amount attached to the spectacle represents a massive victory for the eSports community, so does the television viewership of the event. More than two million people tuned in to Epic Games to watch the top players clash for massive amounts of money (Gonzalez, 2019).

Epic Games is the official Fortnite broadcast channel and has pushed to become the largest media space in all of eSports. Their coverage (of not only this event but others) along with other eSports media coverage is drastically changing the landscape of eSports. eSports refers to a (or any) multiplayer video game that is played competitively for spectators, typically by professional or collegiate gamers (Taylor, 2012). At the professional level, players have the ability to earn compensation for their participation and victories. Players attending a college with an eSports program can position themselves to earn scholarship money and continue playing in hopes they perform strongly enough to become a professional. The media coverage of such events is evolving, creating new opportunities for professional and collegiate gamers.

Media coverage helps create an eSports cultural industry among collegiate and professional gamers. eSports is adjusting collegiate and professional gaming alongside the digital media field due to the heavy interest among the younger generations (the winner of the Fortnite World Cup is 16 years old) and a heavier media presence, among many other factors. In the instance of eSports, a cultural industry is being created due to the combination of the production, broadcasting, and distribution of media coverage within the eSports field. In turn, the players of eSports repeatedly vault to the top of eSports professionalism due to financial gain through

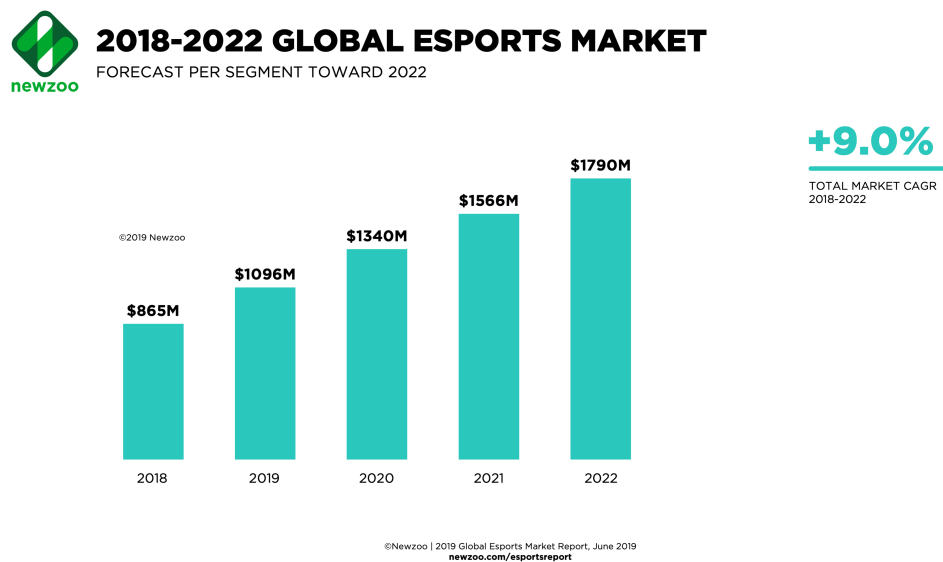
media coverage of mass events. With the branding, marketing, broadcasting, and media coverage of the Fortnite World Cup, there was an increase in revenue. Epic Games eventually turned a substantial amount of those dollars into prize money for the winners of the tournament. Although the current media coverage and the significant tournament awards stand as relatively new, eSports is not a new phenomenon.

The first major wave of eSports began in October of 1972 at Stanford University. The game ‘Spacewar’ attracted the most attention. With thousands of spectators, this event led to a major push to open the first video game competition, finally coming together in the 1980s (Bountie Gaming, 2018). Twin Galaxies, a company that promoted video games and publicized high scores, was one of the first companies to promote eSports through the media, even publishing records in the Guinness Book of World Records (Bountie Gaming, 2018).

However, it was in 1997 when the Red Annihilation tournament hosted “Quake Game” and held 2,000 participants. In many record bookkeeping cases, this event is respected as the first ever true eSports spectacle (Bountie Gaming, 2018). A few weeks later the media coverage, and the conception of the world wide web, of the early start of eSports pushed a spotlight on the new culture to help create the Cyberathlete Professional League (CPL) in 1997. The league offered prize money, such as \$15,000 for the winner. The event stands as the first time a winner pocketed an amount of this magnitude (Bountie Gaming, 2018). The rise of Internet coverage of events paired with advancing gaming delivered more revenue in the pockets of not only companies holding contests, but the gamers.

The amount of money won by eSports gamers ever since has changed the industry. In 2017, the largest bag a winner carried home totaled over 24 million dollars at The International, one of the largest eSports tournaments in the world (Bountie Gaming, 2018). The projection for

the eSports platform is expected to gather more and more steam in the coming years. Revenue is stacking up at all-time highs, with not only broadcasting rights on TV and radio, but also the eSports industry itself. Bountie Gaming predicts eSports revenue will exceed 1.5 billion dollars by the end of 2020 (2018). With this number within reach this year, media coverage surrounding eSports could create one of the largest revenue streams in all of sports if major networks continue buying into the eSports medium. In figure 1 (below) provided by *Newzoo* (2019), they project the future for the global eSports market. With an estimated 134 million dollars in 2020, eSports growth is reaching an all-time high. As I move forward in my thesis I will show how media coverage translates into monetary value in eSports.



ESPN is one of the largest and most impactful players in regard to broadcasting eSports on legacy television. The media giant is the first to produce and air a professional gaming contest in prime time after they broadcast the Overwatch League Grand finals July 27, 2018 (Winick, 2018). ESPN and the Overwatch League agreed to a multi-year contract agreement in July of 2018; a deal that includes over the air broadcasting of Overwatch eSports tournaments and highlights featured on ABC the following day (Van Allen, 2018). As the contract plays out over

the next several years, the test of how much eSports needs television to succeed will be paramount in showing the connection between television coverage and eSports. Legacy television, including ESPN, is a slightly behind the curve compared to how online streaming covers eSports due to the nature of eSports being dominated by streaming services. However, the commitment by ESPN is showing how legacy media can cover eSports, but also proves how difficult it is to compete with online platforms. A challenge for ESPN and other traditional legacy media companies is finding ways to broadcast eSportsing events on their traditional delivery systems, such as ESPN and ESPN2, but also to present these eSportsing events in a broadcast that connects with the vast majority of people. In most cases, ESPN attempts to broadcast its eSportsing events similarly to the way it broadcasts its traditional sports.

The partnership will also showcase a plan for television networks in terms of future broadcasting of eSports and determine if the resources used are worth the investment (Van Allen, 2018). Once the multi-year contract expires, the next move among major networks will produce clear answers on the intentions of the eSports broadcasting future. In a sense, it presents a case of which side's success is contingent on the other. A primary motivation for networks to join in on broadcasting eSports is the financial benefits.

The parallel between traditional sports and eSports is drawing closer and closer, and in some respects, eSports is proving more successful. Competitive video game play drew 258 million unique viewers globally in 2017. In contrast, The National Football League posted its viewer number at 204 million for the 2016 NFL regular season in the United States, per the Nielsen Ratings database (Molina, 2018). While projections can be hit or miss in certain situations, the trajectory in eSports has only shot up and has yet to level out.

By 2021, the eSports realm is expected to make two billion dollars in revenue and see nearly 300 million viewers, according to SuperData, a division of Nielsen devoted to tracking the gaming and interactive entertainment sector. SuperData CEO, Joost van Druenen, has noted that eSports is, “growing at a pretty steady pace, well into the double digits year over year, which is very healthy” (Molina, 2018). If the spike in revenue continues on its current path, eSports may prove to become one of the most profitable sectors in the professional sports industry. This is especially true with broadcast rights and media coverage of the eSports events.

To get eSports broadcasting and media on its feet, eSports broadcast had to copy the formula of traditional sport broadcasts to gain a sense of direction (Seifts, 2019). Now that the eSports field is a few decades past its starting point, the market for broadcasting these events is moving in a direction not yet seen before. Interconnectivity in broadcasts is becoming a concept fans and users want to engage with in eSports play. Technology is moving in the direction where those watching the games can change camera angles during the event, use different camera angles to zoom in on certain players or teams, or even place bets. Online streams will dominate the market for these broadcasts (Seifts, 2019).

The technology allowing eSports broadcasts to function in such a way will extend its usage into the traditional sports broadcast platform to create a more functional broadcast for today’s generation. Less and less people watch traditional TV broadcasts for “big games” (ratings for 2019’s Super Bowl reached a 10-year low and the 2018 MLB World Series fell 23 percent from 2017) opening the door for innovative ideas for traditional sporting events (Seifts, 2019). These numbers stick out because of the decline in viewership across the top three major leagues (National Football League, Major League Baseball, and the National Basketball Association) all happened in the same year, while eSports gained viewership in the sports

industry (Seifts, 2019). This could mean the industry sees a spike in major sports broadcast companies (such as FOX, ESPN, NBC, or others) investing rights to eSports events.

Revenue for the broadcast partners in eSports also means more money in the pockets of professional eSports players and teams. As of the start of 2020, 'Team Liquid' stands atop the current worldwide leaderboard with the most money earned over the course of 1,565 tournaments. With 28 billion dollars in earnings, Team Liquid is the wealthiest team to ever connect online and participate. Currently, 98 competitors across the world accumulate at least one billion dollars in revenue (Earnings, 2020). The rise to the top for many of these teams and players in the professional ranks comes as no surprise given the spike in participation of eSports. Television networks are recognizing the trend of financial gain in eSports, wanting to join in to make a profit off broadcasting.

While professional gamers have solidified their role in the gaming community for several years, competitive collegiate gaming is now starting to take shape. At the beginning of 2017, 40 colleges and universities offered scholarship programs for eSports. Today, 70 programs offer scholarship money. The amount of dollars invested into collegiate eSports has risen above nine million dollars (Kauwelo & Winter, 2019).

Robert Morris University was the first university to offer eSports scholarships, starting in 2014. The school forked out over 500,000 dollars for its intercollegiate gaming team. The University of Pikeville in Kentucky ponied up as well and now offers full-ride scholarships. These scholarships are available at a rate of 23,000 dollars a year for tuition and 14,000 dollars to cover room and board. Along with earning scholarships, the universities eSports players are listed as "student-athletes" within the athletic department to commit to a high standard of eSports (Jenny, Keiper & Manning, 2016). The University of Utah opened its own program in 2017 and

became the first Power Five school (a school residing in either the ACC, SEC, Pac-12, Big Ten, or Big 12) across the NCAA to offer eSports scholarships (Kauwelo & Winter, 2019). With scholarship money comes responsibility for the competitors. The media spotlight is being placed on these eSports students and these collegiate eSports teams because of the magnitude of change eSports is bringing to academics and college campuses.

My thesis identifies how media coverage of eSports is evolving at the professional and collegiate levels. At the professional ranks, media coverage changes rapidly to cater toward the masses of audience members who seek eSports content. To first jumpstart eSports broadcasting and media, the industry copied the formula of traditional sport broadcasts to gain a sense of direction (Seifts, 2019). Once the eSports industry succeeded in doing so, several eSports brands created their own broadcasting companies, such as Epic Games.

Epic Games, alongside other major broadcast players in the professional ranks like Twitch, YouTube, and Mixer, stream their events to audiences for on demand content; a concept becoming more popular as eSports grow. At the collegiate level, ESPN is taking steps to broadcast eSports Collegiate Championships to push younger audiences back toward linear television. My thesis research presents two major questions:

R1: How is media coverage evolving in terms of professional eSports?

R2: How is media coverage evolving at the collegiate level?

I will use media management and political economy to demonstrate how the understanding of economics in eSports will further change the media coverage of eSports events. Media management, while primarily concerned with legacy media, is a theory with the potential to explain the changes eSports is bringing to sports media coverage. In Küng's *Strategic Management in the Media* (2008), she mentions how media management in an academic and

cultural medium is an “under-explored and under-theorized field” (p. 3). In the case of eSports using media management as a central focus, it helps me investigate the business objectives driving the new ways to broadcast and cover eSportsing events. These objectives are at play not only at the professional level, but also in the collegiate ranks.

Media management theory also includes political economy, which explores broader social contexts of media. Küng makes this observation about political economy approaches to media management, “This field combines economics, politics, and sociology perspectives to analyze the structure of the media industries and regulatory and policy issues, looking particularly at the economic determinants, ownership structures and political allegiances” (p. 4). The theory of political economy and economic determinants is particularly useful for my thesis because eSports began as a social phenomenon outside of commercial media and collegiate sports.

The economic perspective will allow me to analyze how media coverage in eSports is evolving both professionally and collegiately and the underlying commercial factors of this coverage. Economic determinants in eSports can be categorized as factors that decisively alter the result of how the media covers eSports. In other words, the contracts eSports platforms and linear television and online streaming groups agree to are commercial in nature but have evolved around the social practices of gaming. The purpose of my thesis is to understand how both professional and collegiate sports coverage emerged from, and responds to, the social practice of eSports, and turns that coverage into a viable form of commercial media.

The next section is my literature review that encompasses many aspects of eSports. The research includes eSports media coverage, how media is affecting eSports players and the platform as a whole, why individuals are playing eSports, and why eSports is being treated as an

actual sport. However, some of the research done in this section is not specifically tied to media coverage in eSports. Rather, other factors regarding why people play eSports, and the concerns surrounding the gaming culture, will also be addressed. It is important to show this side of eSports for my thesis because it provides context and awareness to the surrounding features in eSports. Following the literature review, I will explain the methodology I will be using for my research, and my use of interviews to best capture the analysis of media coverage evolution in eSports. In addition, I will use personal quotes from researchers found in articles to present a deeper analysis of where the eSports industry stands in relation to media coverage and its changes. The quotes captured in personal interviews and through online sources are the bulk of my research, and provide the exact details needed to compile my thesis.

Literature Review

The relevance of eSports in common culture is spiking. In Chalmet's (2017) *The Road to Professionalism* the Electronic Sports League (ESL) has already grown from 3.6 million accounts to almost seven million in seven years. This growth is proving that eSports is becoming a cultural phenomenon. Broadcasting rights have become a major topic of discussion in eSports. Live eSports events create space for national TV companies to spend massive amounts of budget money on the events to gain viewership and grow the medium (Chalmet, 2017).

In Sjöblom's (2019) *Final Report* of eSports, he explains how eSports is growing by the minute and a massive audience is present to consume content placed on social platforms. Consumers enjoy eSports now more than ever "due to the live-broadcasting nature of video game streaming, it offers a unique relationship between the media creator and the media consumer" (Sjöblom, 2019, p.8). Not only do video games help build a relationship between the consumer and the creator, they can help us understand culture and social issues. In Muriel and Crawford's

(2018) *Video Games as Culture* they discuss how “Video games embody some of the most important aspects of wider society such as a pervasive digital culture, the hegemony of neoliberal political rationalities, the emergence of participatory culture, and the rise of new modes of meaning construction (p.4). Both articles tap into interaction between people and how it shapes the video game culture, but Muriel and Crawford dive into the idea that video games are one of the most relevant and constant cultural products since they came to the forefront of society.

Carbonie’s (2018) study of *Positive Personal Development Through eSports* places an emphasis on how the culture of video gaming has turned into positive personal development for an individual. It boils down to the internal belief that the person participating in online gaming can create personal growth and “achieve personal values through their personal development attained in their play of eSports” (p.5). Carbonie makes the connection between sports and eSports and how they both encourage growth for the youth in society because of teamwork, bonding, social skills and how people perceive themselves.

In Tang’s (2018) *Understanding Esports from the Perspective of Team Dynamics*, he delves into the aspect of being a team player and the players understanding communication between other people. With communication and group participation playing a factor for overall success in eSports, Tang believes that “contrary to stereotypical perception of gamers, eSports players need to communicate with teammates effectively and operate as a team member” (p.12). The communication between teammates creates a positive environment that can be carried over into the workspace. It is in this vein where many start to associate eSports players with athletics, because of the team and collaborative activities that bring the players together as one.

Even though concerns about the lack of physical movement in eSports have created skepticism among traditionalists, this skepticism has not stopped eSports advocates from arguing

that eSports should be regarded as sports. Papaloukas (2018) opens the conversation in his journal *E-Sports Explosion: The Birth of Esports Law or merely a New Trend Driving Change in Traditional Sports Law* when he breaks down the fact that “fast rising turnovers, the low cost organizations as well as the accessibility will probably make people change their minds in the very near future” (p.1). eSports involve anyone from anywhere in the world who logs on and joins. In addition, one does not have to be physically fit to be extraordinary at eSports, which can make the platform appealing for this generation’s youth. However, this lack of physicality involved in eSports hinders some traditional sports activists from including eSports as an athletic sport.

It is not just the fact people love playing video games, as Jenny (2018) breaks down the business side of eSports in *eSports Venues*, it becomes more and more obvious as to why organizations jump on board:

While eSports-specific venues are increasingly being built, many venues that host eSports competitions were constructed primarily for other professional sports or entertainment. These entertainment facilities must attract popular financially beneficial events in order to survive. eSports events have great potential to fit this mold. (p.34)

If a sports organization can lease out its building to an eSports group or league, then it brings in revenue. The eSports league also brings in money because of the amount of people watching live in-person or online, providing a partnership that works for both sides. With companies dishing out funds for eSports, it shows there is financial incentive for the broader sports industry to embrace eSports as a competitive sport.

The spectrum for eSports does not only sit on the professional side, however. In Kauwelo's (2019) journal *Taking College eSports Seriously*, he details the growth of collegiate eSports and how universities have set programs, offering scholarships to interested participants. At least 70 NCAA schools have programs, totaling nine million dollars of scholarship money (p. 2448). Professional eSports has already made a mark and will continue growing, but the addition of scholarships for eSports in universities now allows students to commit to an education while pursuing their professional goals.

According to Witkowski (2018), many institutions will continue to move forward with open arms to the idea of eSports as "a sports media construct, with expert performances professionally packaged as competitive sporting event and commodified as a networked media entertainment spectacle" (p. 1). With the 70 (and counting) universities becoming comfortable with eSports as a budding brand and activity, it opens the door for excellent growth and deeper research.

While eSports provide a platform for students to grow, not everyone views the activity as a mode of positive development. According to Kaburakis (2018) in *eSports: Children, stimulants and video-gaming-induced inactivity: eSports inactivity*, he references the fact children who look for a way to college through eSports can spend up to 12-14 hours a day playing video games, sleeping a mere four hours per night (p.1). This affects the child's development and sleep cycles. It also provokes questions about parenting styles. According to Jiow (2018) in *Perceptions of video gaming careers and its implications on parental mediation*, "parents ostensibly withdraw or remain remotely detached from their children's video gaming whilst monitoring them from afar" (p.1). With no upfront monitoring, children can jump into any online gaming whenever they so choose, which could be problematic.

In Bányai's (2018) *The Psychology of eSports: A Systematic Literature Review*, his research concludes that while "the lack of physical activity and its sedentary nature" is an issue, there is not enough data to make a hard-nosed conclusion about whether eSports can be a positive or negative for the psychology of those involved (p.26). His study is based around the rise of eSports in the last several years, and he notes, more research is needed to fully capture how it impacts people playing and those around the eSports spectrum.

Methods

In chapter two of Taylor's (2012) *Raising the Stakes* she argues how eSports is an actual sport. While some of the players within eSports consider themselves athletes, others consider themselves "geeks." By asking players what they feel about this topic, Taylor looks at eSports from a wider lens, separating herself from the eSports industry by using ethnography. Taylor does not observe eSports and the media covering eSports from the point of view of the subjects. Rather she views herself as an outside source using participant observation and interviewing subjects to gather facts. Her findings conclude that many players see themselves as true athletes because of the time and effort they pour into eSports. In other instances, players see themselves as gaming geeks, fully consumed by the act of playing video games (Taylor, 2012).

This information is useful for several reasons; one being how media coverage impacts audiences and how broadcasts should tailor their content for the viewers. In addition, it shows her research is impactful in terms of interviewing. On the contrary, I view the media coverage of eSports and the medium as a whole through ethnography because of my current involvement in sports media as a broadcaster and producer. Even though I currently work in media and sports, it is vital that I capture information using interviewing and quoted sources both ethnographically and outside of my duties as a media member.

To best capture the reasons for the evolution of media coverage in professional and collegiate eSports, I used research quotes from articles and publications in addition to interviewing individuals involved with media coverage in eSports. I also attended a handful of events, engaging in participant observation. It was important for me to attend eSports events to provide context for the phenomenon of eSports becoming a cultural industry. Participant observation allowed me to learn more about how eSports events are broadcast, created, and distributed. Participant observation helped me gain a larger understanding about a particular group of people through engaging with that group's cultural environment. Participant observation of eSports for this study does include watching eSports players in person and attending both professional and collegiate eSports events, but more so watching how the media covers these eSports events.

I attended events hosted at Ball State University by Ball State Sports Link and the Ball State eSports club. While these events took place on my current campus, attending collegiate eSports events helped reveal why collegiate eSports gain as much media coverage and attention as they do. At the professional level, events take place all over the world. I attended the Wizard World Gaming event in Columbus, Ohio October 20, 2019 to partake in participant observation. Consuming an eSports event as a participant observer at a professional event gave me a baseline for how media covers events on the ground.

I use direct quotes from articles and publications because it shows ways in which people are talking about media coverage in eSports. How the media itself reports on the evolution of eSports and the media coverage of eSports is the primary source of information for my thesis. I am using quotes from articles and publications because it allows me to then augment that provided information into personal interviews I conducted. To see how, why, and when people

are talking about the media coverage of eSports is critical for my project because it provides a level of analysis of what is currently taking place in eSports. Those conversations are taking place within online publications; some by major media corporations such as ESPN, others by eSports reporters at companies like VentureBeat. In turn, the personal interviews allow me to go deeper in depth in terms of supplementing the articles and publications, thus providing a vast amount of dialogue within both professional and collegiate eSports media coverage. While using the method of interviewing, I spoke with Daniel Collette of ESPN eSports Digital Team. Collette is part of a new ESPN initiative to provide eSports content for ESPN on a digital platform not yet done by the company. I identified Daniel by doing a google search on top digital content creators at ESPN and found his Twitter profile. From there, I reached out to him to set up an interview date.

In a personal interview with Jeff Eisenband, who is a broadcaster, writer, and host for the NBA 2k League, he sheds light on how the industry is covering eSports today and why it is important for major companies to pursue online streaming. Eisenband's job as a broadcaster is to present each eSporting event he does in a digestible way for audiences to understand, whether it is a casual fan or a die-hard NBA 2k League fan. In another personal interview, I spoke with Dean Takahashi, who is a lead writer for GamesBeat covering collegiate and professional eSports. In our conversation, I was able to learn more about the business side of eSports and media coverage as he explained how more companies are building partnerships to create stronger revenue streams. I came in contact with Jeff through a mutual friend, who put me in touch with Jeff. I was able to reach out via email to set up an interview date.

Throughout my research I used the snowball interview method. After the conclusion of several interviews, I asked interview subjects who else may be of assistance in terms of data

collection. For data needed in my thesis, I was able to use this method twice, but did not use the content provided by the two other interviews for my thesis as much of it was repeat information. However, as I conducted each interview I carefully listened and took notes. Listening to the subject's answers allowed me to base further questions. Leading up to each interview, I had several questions, and allowed the answers to those questions to expand on the conversation. I had pre-planned questions while also being spontaneous with follow-up questions. This was helpful and provided new information I may not otherwise been able to gather. Throughout my thesis, I will specifically identify the individual when it is a personal interview to clarify where the source is coming from. The other sources outside of the personal interviews will be publications and online articles.

My thesis is analyzed by finding commonalities between the answers of subjects during an interview and the data given by other research and researchers on the media coverage of eSporting events. Attending professional events as a participant observer and conducting interviews with those involved in the coverage of eSports helped me collect important data on the development of this emerging media content. In addition, reading online research and book content has allowed my study to advance further due to the number of sources who commented on the topic of media coverage in collegiate and professional eSports. While I was not able to interview every person I wanted to receive comments from, there was information available on websites that provided answers to several key questions. In regard to Michael Fay Jr. (formally the eSports director at the University of Akron) I was able to find information and comments from him on Akron's website. He breaks down why eSports streaming and broadcasting is important and how his team of students is engaging with eSports content. In more cases than not,

content such as this was impactful for my research and added a substantial amount of depth to the project.

Chapter 2: Professional eSports Media Coverage

On May third, 2018 the eSports world watched the League of Legends Midseason-Invitational in Adlershof, Germany and Paris, France. While 7,000 plus were in attendance to see the three week-long tournament, it was the number of online viewers that broke records. With over 60 million unique viewers, the tournament showcased just how massive the eSports audience is in regard to professional gaming (De La Navarre, 2019). Over two billion hours of content from this event were consumed with several outlets being available to stream the event.

Twitch pulled in a viewership audience of almost 450,000 at one time, while YouTube trailed Twitch by just a few thousand. The average concurrent viewership of the event closed at 24.5 million (De La Navarre, 2019). This event alone exemplifies the number of viewers professional eSports is able to reach with a single event. For comparison, the 2019 Super Bowl tracked 98 million unique viewers and had 75,000 people fill the Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta (De La Navarre, 2019). While massive eSports tournaments and online streams have not yet quite caught up to events like the Super Bowl, the numbers in this League of Legends tournament suggest professional eSports is not much further behind traditional sports:

Such a comparison demonstrates the grounded prevalence that traditional sports have. Of course, eSports are looking to swim in the same pool, not kick out those that were there before them. In this particular pairing, there is a parallel between marketability. The Super Bowl is famous for its advertisements, and more specifically, it is known for the win-win-win nature of its marketing. (De La Navarre, p. 28)

Navarre sees the unique opportunity for eSports marketing to skyrocket and with that, broadcast revenue via either online streaming or traditional television is going to be a major revenue stream in professional eSports.

Throughout the duration of this chapter I will divide professional eSports coverage into different sections, beginning with ESPN's eSports coverage. Following that section, I will dive into online streaming and how it is expanding into one of the largest media platforms. The next section is dedicated to linear television coverage and over the top content. While those two concepts rival one another, it is imperative to compare the two together to see how they are helping and hurting one another. In the final two sections, I will look at an emerging eSports media powerhouse in the VENN Network and finally examine the emerging coverage of the National Basketball Association's (NBA) eSports NBA 2k League.

ESPN's eSports Coverage

In December of 2016, a major deal between Riot Game Inc. and BAMTech was struck. The two sides agreed upon a 350-million-dollar figure for BAMTech to have the rights for customers to access Riot Game Inc. content on their terms. Customers would have access to any of this content whenever they so pleased, ushering in a new era of eSports coverage. This marked the first major media rights deal in eSports and the potential to change the landscape for how major video gaming could profit in the same manner as traditional sports (Novy-Williams, 2018). However, after several months of debate, the deal fell through and Riot Games Inc. pivoted toward a new option: ESPN+. The new deal between Riot Game Inc. and ESPN is centered around League of Legends, one of eSports most popular games:

In a new streaming agreement with ESPN+, the digital platform will provide League of Legends matches, available on ESPN+ on a non-exclusive basis,

meaning eSports fans can still watch event on YouTube, Twitch, and Riot's own website. (Novy-Williams, p. 2).

Since the deal took place, ESPN+ has become a hub for various types of eSports content. To find the eSports content on ESPN's website, users do not have to travel far to find the eSports tab. Under ESPN's ellipses section, eSports is one of the first sports that appears (depending on how each person sets up his or her ESPN account, as sports tagged as favorites can be seen even higher at the top of the list). Once a user clicks on eSports, a page appears that solely focuses on eSports. As ESPN is often deemed the "mothership of sports coverage" eSports having its content seen on ESPN's platforms is a massive deal. The amount of people seeing eSports content on ESPN is now higher than ever. The content that is being covered is vast and continuing to grow:

Today, the sports-media giant has a digital vertical dedicated to eSports and it covers the industry in depth, with player interviews, on-the-ground reporting from major tournaments, power rankings and analysis. ESPN airs a handful of eSports tournaments on its cable channels. However, just a few years ago, ESPN didn't have any interest in professional gaming. Former ESPN president John Skipper made the following statement about eSports in 2014: "It's not a sport, it's a competition. Chess is a competition. Checkers is a competition. Mostly, I'm interested in doing real sports. (Conditt, p.2)

Since that comment made by Skipper (and Skipper stepping down in 2017 with Jimmy Pitaro taking over as president of ESPN) ESPN has joined forces with eSports to bolster its coverage of professional and collegiate gaming. In February of 2020, ESPN produced a live broadcast of a Madden 20 tournament on ESPN2, its second largest cable channel available

(ESPN.com, 2020). ESPN also launched an EXP eSports series. This series showcases eSports competitions at ESPN-owned events.

They'll typically include a variety of games with collegiate, pro and pro-am formats. You'll have to watch online if you want to tune in live, but there will be "tape-delayed" highlights shows on ESPN and other ABC TV channels after the fact. (Fingas, p.1)

The motivation for creating this type of eSports content stems from ESPN attempting to reach a wider audience and build upon a foundation of covering eSports since the mid 2010s. In an article written by ESPN's staff (2019), Justin Connolly, executive vice president of Disney and ESPN affiliate sales and marketing, commented:

Leaning into eSports represents ESPN's focus on serving sports fans and expanding audiences. We remain committed to serving gaming fans across all platforms and content types, and Apex Legends is the perfect title to showcase EXP's vision of offering world-class live eSports events anchored by storytelling and multi-platform distribution. (ESPN.com, p. 3)

In addition to broadcasting events live on cable television and on ESPN+ as a streaming option, ESPN consistently covers eSports in feature stories.

ESPN is famous for delivering features on athletes all across the world, such as an article written by Nick Wagoner about a San Francisco 49ers football player, Joe Staley. Or the unthinkable story of Sarah Thomas. A swimmer defying all odds to complete a 54-hour, death-defying swim across the English Channel, written by Aishwarya Kumar. Just like these stories on traditional athletes, ESPN is covering gut-wrenching features on eSports athletes. For example,

ESPN staff writer Jacob Wolf (2019) chronicled the story of Timothy Anselimo. The then 19-year-old was one of the best professional Madden and NBA 2K League eSports players:

In 2018, Anselimo became one of the most respected players in the NBA 2K League. Drafted in April that year, he went from being a used car salesman on the Gulf Coast to competing nearly every week in New York, playing for the Milwaukee Bucks and pocketing \$32,000 for six months of competition. Now, all of that was on the line for the No. 25 pick in the Season 1 draft. (p.17)

Everything was on the line for Anselimo because he was playing “Madden NFL 19” offline with some friends to get ready for a qualifier when a gunman entered Chicago Pizza and opened fire on him and those inside. While he survived, his right wrist was severely injured, forcing him to question whether or not he would ever play again.

This story, and many other eSports features such as this one, have made headlines all over ESPN. While scanning ESPN's website, it is noticeable how much coverage eSports is receiving compared to traditional sports. There is more coverage pointed toward traditional sports, but the amount of eSports content pouring in is no small number. ESPN Senior eSports Editor Ryan Garfat knew the exact moment he became intrigued by eSports. He immediately knew this was a platform worth investing in:

I walked in the room [at a 2014 X Games Invitational for a Call of Duty LAN competition] and there were more people outside in the 115-degree heat waiting to get into that [Call of Duty] tent than they could fit. I sat in that room and I said, ‘We need to be here and tell these stories, this isn’t going anywhere. That visceral experience of watching something and rooting for something, it’s such a core principle to how we cover sports. It’s so familiar. And it didn’t even matter to me

at the time whether or not I understood the game, the nuances, the meta. It didn't matter. I've covered Super Bowls, national championships, and it is the exact same feeling of being in that arena, in that stadium, rooting for the same thing that made it so familiar. I said we need to be able to tell these stories. We need to be there. (Orland, p. 3)

Widespread belief from people not in the eSports inner circles continuously say eSports is not a real sport. However, ESPN and its partners do not agree with that assessment. The realm of eSports is a new learning curve for many, but it is one ESPN has embraced when it comes to producing content and broadcasts of eSports says Garfat:

It takes one guy at a high position to really understand it. The 'eSports isn't real sports' thing does not come from us. Those are just comments. We put on the spelling bee. We have poker on ESPN [broadcasts]. We cover the WWE. There never really was any pushback from anybody at ESPN, there was just education. (Orland, p. 7)

When adding eSports to its distribution platforms, ESPN knew the risks it was taking. According to eSports Observer Senior Editor Taylor Cocke, eSports is known to be protective of its content and the audience can be hostile toward mega companies such as ESPN when they become involved in producing, broadcasting, or creating eSports content:

eSports audiences are notoriously antagonistic towards anyone that is perceived as an 'outsider' in the space. Meaning any mainstream site that doesn't take the 'hire all endemic, well-known content creators' approach will likely be ignored by endemic audiences. (Orland, p. 8)

For this reason, ESPN knew it had to make a splash when adding to its eSports coverage. With their ability to hire well known talent, producers, creators, and writers, they dipped their hands into the pool of eSports creators. ESPN contacted writers Tyler Erzberger and Jacob Wolf (who I have cited throughout my thesis) because of how well-known they are in the eSports world. Adding these two to their coverage legitimized their eSports coverage, thus gaining more trust, access and ability to cover eSports stories than ever before in their company's history. Erzberger and Wolf (among many other current eSports staff members at ESPN) have generated an uptick in eyeballs reading ESPN's content. However, Garfat does not take the numbers to heart because the true motivation of covering eSports is to find the best stories:

The numbers are sort of secondary. I'm a journalist and I try not to cloud my judgment in what tracks and what doesn't. We certainly look at stats, but the story is really what I'm most interested in... To me, if we tell a good story it's a good story and it doesn't really matter if it's on a PlayStation controller or on a football field, on a pitch. (Orland, p. 11)

Orland proceeds to explain the details of the eSports broadcasting industry as a whole and where the industry stands:

As the numbers of players and fans following eSports continue to grow, the audience for that coverage is growing too. But there's still some question as to whether eSports coverage can get non-fans interested in watching or reading about games they don't already follow closely. (Orland, p. 13)

Cocke expands even further as to how specific brands, outlets, and sites are handling the coverage of eSports:

As it stands, eSports coverage is at a bit of a standstill. Most sites are focused on continuing to do what's always 'worked' in the past: event coverage, analysis of games, player interviews, and the occasional feature. Problem is, there's a limit on the audience with that sort of content. Only the truly hardcore care, which is fine if you're a small site just doing it for the love of eSports. But it becomes a problem when you're trying to sustain a full staff. The question becomes, how do you educate people fast enough to get them interested in viewing these games, if not playing them enough to educate themselves? eSports coverage, on the whole, doesn't care about that question at all, and it hurts their audiences. It's not about teaching the game in every single article/video. It's about making sure that those articles/videos are understandable—or at least compelling—for those that don't understand the game in the first place. That is the real challenge going forward, and it's something I think eSports media needs to be working on. (Orland, P.14)

An example of ESPN attempting to make eSports compelling to the traditional sports audience is by using Tyler "Ninja" Blevins. Ninja, the most recognizable name, face, and user in eSports, was featured in a 2018 edition of ESPN The Magazine. This stands as the first time an eSports player has been used on the magazine's cover (Orland, 2018). ESPN The Magazine is a highly recognized magazine in sports media. They cover the hottest topics around sports, the deepest stories, and intriguing features on players, coaches, and typically anyone who is around the sports landscape. For ESPN to place Ninja on its magazine cover, it shows the commitment ESPN has to covering eSports at the highest level. It also presents an attempt to find commonalities between traditional sports and eSports.

Online Streaming Platforms

Ninja's presence and widespread love by his fans spans across the world – and he may have created a shockwave in the eSports online streaming sector. The professional eSports superstar, best known for his prowess in *Fortnite*, left Twitch (one of the top online streaming platforms in the world) and joined Mixer with an exclusivity contract:

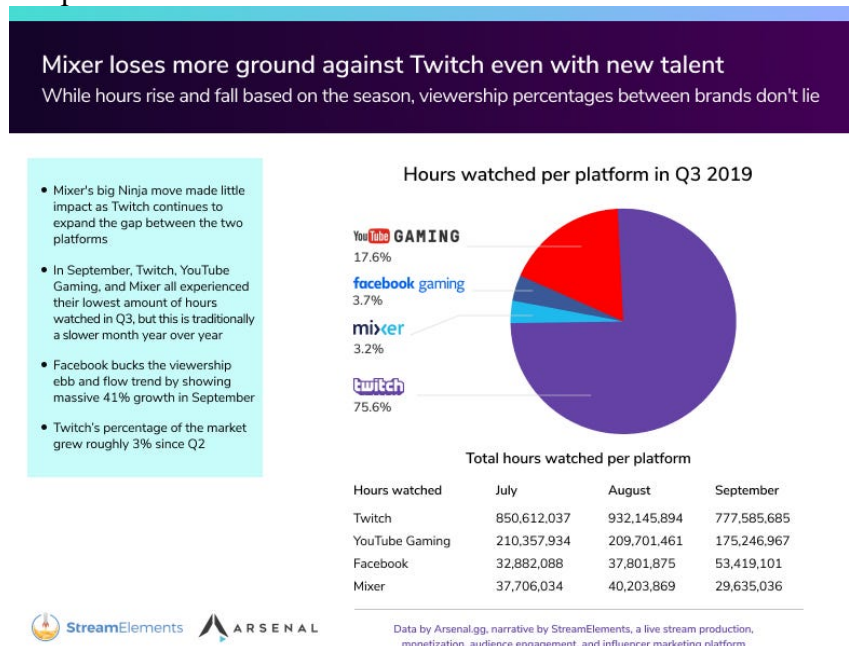
Deals like these have stoked the fires in the ongoing streaming wars and have ignited discussion surrounding how much a contract is worth. According to a report from CNN, Blevins' Mixer deal may have cost Microsoft somewhere between \$20 and \$30 million. (Desatoff, p. 1)

Ninja is an eSports gameplay user who used to broadcast his own events on Twitch, drawing in 14 million followers on his old Twitch account. Since moving over to Mixer in the past few months, Ninja has created a much smaller following of 2.3 million followers (Webb, 2019). While Ninja is earning more money due to his fresh contract, Mixer is not seeing the viewership numbers that Ninja drew on Twitch. However, Ninja did begin a trend of popular gaming streamers jumping off Twitch and going to Mixer. According to Webb (2019) the actual hours of gaming content streamed on Mixer rose to 32.6 million over the past several months. This provided a boost of 188 percent from the few months before Ninja signed with Mixer. But even with the rise in streaming content, it hasn't solved one of Mixers main eSports coverage issues:

The excitement among streamers hasn't translated into more [eSports] viewers. Mixer saw a 10.6% decrease in total hours watched during the last three months, according to Newzoo. Reports show that Mixer had less hours watched in September (29.6 million), a month after Ninja arrived, than it did in July (37.7

million), the month before his exclusive deal began. However, Newzoo notes that Mixer has more than doubled its viewership since last year, but the situation demonstrates just how hard it is to wrestle viewers away from Twitch. Closing the gap between Twitch and Mixer will take more than just one popular channel, even if it's a superstar streamer like Ninja. (Webb, p. 3-5)

Even with the power Ninja possesses in the gaming industry, figure 2 (below), provided by *StreamElements* (2019), demonstrates how much control Twitch has in the eSports online streaming service platform.



An average of 15 million viewers log on to Twitch every single day to view content (Fortney, 2019). Twitch is wildly successful as a broadcasting and streaming platform for many reasons, such as how user friendly it is, a site to host and watch live eSports streams, and a massive hub for gamers to come together in a social setting, making people feel comfortable about who they are as gamers. Twitch is also using the, “Why would anyone want to watch someone else play video games” phrase and using it to their advantage. The truth of the matter is, people DO want to watch others game. To Twitch, those who are using that phrase are

individuals who do not understand the value of eSports and gaming culture (Fortney, 2019).

Because of this motto and attitude, Twitch is the largest eSports broadcasting site, even surpassing ESPN in audience size:

In 2014, Twitch accounted for 40% of the live streaming traffic in the United States and 1.8% of all internet traffic, second only to Google, Netflix, and Apple.

In 2017, it surpassed legacy network ESPN in audience size and live streamed more content than ESPN, WWE, and ML – combined. By 2020, the number of eSports viewers worldwide will grow from 380 million to 589 million, according to research firm Newzoo. (Fortney, p. 2)

Going back and looking purely at Ninja's contract dollars, now that he has moved on from Twitch, his income is semi-comparable to many of the top talent in professional sports. Hundreds of players across the National Football League, Major League Baseball, National Basketball Association, and the National Hockey League are earning as much or more than Blevins, but it is the beginning of eSports players seeing massive contracts because of the number of viewers they generate plus advertising revenue brought in. Advertisers and platforms are signing the dotted line with eSports streamers with these large contracts because of the eSports online gaming platforms' growth (Desatoff, 2020). The growth is reaching all-time highs, and streaming platforms are taking notice:

According to reports from streaming analytics group StreamElements, over 12 million hours of livestreaming were watched in 2019, a number that has been increasing exponentially year-over-year. Platforms like Twitch, YouTube Gaming, Facebook Gaming, and Mixer are all competing for eyes, and things have escalated to the point where individual personalities are no longer going to

attract the viewership these companies want. Today, entire eSports leagues are pawns in the greater battle. There's no denying that we live in a post-livestreaming world. A perfect storm made up of the wild popularity of *Fortnite* and the sudden rise of gaming personalities has culminated in a new form of entertainment. The enormous contracts streamers are receiving shows off how dedicated they are to the medium and vying for league exclusivity represents an escalation. Advertisers and non-endemic brands are also taking note, which is contributing to a rapidly inflating economy that orbits around one central concept: we love to watch people play games (Desatoff, p. 4-6)

In today's society, people enjoy watching others play video games at a level we have never seen before. This draws a parallel to people heavily enjoying consuming content about other people's lives, such as YouTube stars divulging their lives out on the Internet for people to see. Now, YouTube may not only hold the key to success with traditional content creators making videos for their audiences, but eSports audiences looking for creative content. YouTube now stands as the largest threat to Twitch in terms of generating viewers on its live streams, and it has every bit to do with the new multi-year deal YouTube announced in January of 2020:

On January 24, gaming studio Activision Blizzard and Google announced a multi-year partnership that would make YouTube the exclusive live streaming partner for its eSports leagues, including Call of Duty and Overwatch League [two of the most watched eSports games]. Twitch formerly had exclusive streaming rights to Activision Blizzard events, signing a two-year deal back in 2017. The studio's move is the equivalent of the Super Bowl and the Olympic Games making FOX their exclusive viewer partner for several years, shutting out all other networks.

The move means that Twitch is losing some of its top traffic drivers. The Overwatch League is the second-most-watched channel on Twitch, with 80 million hours watched since January of 2019. (Khalid, p. 3)

The model YouTube is standing by with its eSports coverage is already changing the way video-on-demand content is being streamed. For one, YouTube is gambling on some of eSports top talent to join them, much like they did years prior in other content areas:

The company is no stranger to betting on talent. YouTube signed exclusive deals with big-name creators like Jack “CouRage” Dunlap, Rachell “Valkyrae” Hofstetter, and others. Each streamer brings in thousands of live viewers whenever they stream but also boasts millions of views from highlight compilations that are uploaded as VODs to YouTube. For a long while, YouTube’s had the core advantage of being the only platform that boasts a popular VOD section while also growing its live streaming component. (Alexander, p. 4)

Alexander proceeds to explain how YouTube continues to build its broadcasting and streaming brand globally on the backbone of eSports games, not just the players:

Now, YouTube is trying to corner the marketplace by bringing in swaths of people via big eSports leagues instead of relying on a few handfuls of popular streamers. Using professional league to drive viewership growth isn’t a new concept; YouTube is just enacting the same strategy traditional broadcasters have used in fights over rights to mainstream sports for decades. The only difference is that YouTube is hoping eSports continues to grow at the rate its going and bring

in more casual viewers through the platform's much bigger VOD audience in the process. (p. 5)

Linear TV and OTT Content

Watching people play video games is a staple of the gaming industry. So much so that ESPN has expanded post-match coverage on its YouTube page called "ESPN eSports." The content featured on the YouTube page ranges from player profiles, match recaps, match previews, interviews, and other exclusive ESPN eSports content. The videos are categorized into playlists and updated frequently with new content. The most popular type of content within this playlist section is 'ESPN eSports Interviews' with over 200 interviews. Many pieces of content have thousands of views and the page continues to grow with over 43,000 subscribers. YouTube is unique in the fact that when a video is posted and a user is subscribed to a certain page, they receive a notification from the YouTube page about the fresh content. This type of content delivery is deemed as 'over the top content' and ESPN and YouTube are two of the major contributors to it.

Clay Halton (2019) explains over the top content (OTT) as:

Film and television content provided via a high-speed Internet connection rather than a cable or satellite provider. Viewers who dislike paying for bundled content are often referred to as cord cutters. OTT does not mean free, as the term encompasses services such as Netflix, Amazon, iTunes and HBO Now. (Halton, p.1)

Streaming services such as Twitch are able to broadcast eSports at different levels. Krefetz (2017) explains Twitch's model and how they are using it to be successful with its branding and marketing:

Twitch has a fairly dynamic approach to getting viewers to pay for its content. First, they give it [Twitch events] all away for free. For those who want special access, which comes mostly in the form of a greater ability to interact with the broadcasters, viewers can choose to support their favorite broadcasters by subscribing to their channels at one of their rates (\$4.99, \$9.99, and \$24.99, depending on the broadcaster and level of interaction). There are two levels of broadcasters: partners and affiliates. Partners have to be approved based on the amount of content they've produced and how many viewers they have reached, and they get some benefits that affiliates don't. But anyone can become an affiliate, which allows them to monetize their streams through advertising, subscriptions, merchandizing, Amazon.com product sales commissions, and direct donations from audiences. (p. 4-5)

In 2019, the Electronic Sports League (ESL) signed an enormous multi-territory rights deal with Blake Broadcasting to be the ESL's exclusive platform:

Under the terms of the deal, CBBN, Blake's [Broadcasting] linear network and over-the-top (OTT) streaming service, will become the exclusive satellite distribution platform to the ESL Pro Tour and Dota 2 competitions from March 2020 to July 2023. The deal, the value of which was not disclosed, covers multiple events including the Intel Extremem Masters, ESL One, ESP Pro League, as well as the DreamHack Masters and DreamHack Open. (Impey, p. 2-3)

Several reasons as to why the ESL partnered with Blake Broadcasting are noted by ESL's chief commercial office, Thomas Schmidt. However, the main focus is to connect deeper with the

mainstream audiences while keeping eSports purists happy with the coverage of professional eSports:

ESL and DreamHack are extremely focused on improving the coverage and reach of our events, and with this partnership, our tournaments and other content will be available to hundreds of millions of satellite and cable-equipped homes. Our agreement with BBN is in line with our ambition to expand our programming to mainstream audiences without comprising our world-class digital coverage for the eSports community that we're committed to serve. (Impey, p. 4-5)

Mobile Media Coverage

Audiences react a certain way to eSports on major linear television networks, perhaps pushing older viewers away from the screen when they see gaming on TV. This backlash has caused many people to conduct research surrounding the discussion of what people in society think of eSports. Freitas (2019) conducted research to break down four reasons why a large portion of society views eSports in a negative light, hurting eSports chances at building a bigger brand and sponsor image: (1) gaming is an unproductive activity, (2) violent videogames incite aggressive behaviors, (3) videogames lead to gaming addiction, and (4) eSports lead to eSports related gambling addiction. While the study by Freitas concluded there is substantial evidence of eSports promoting a gambling addiction, he says there is no definitive evidence that supports the notion of eSports causing harmful aggressiveness in people's behavior. The other points are still unknown at this time.

Freitas says the perception by the public surrounding these four concerns may create doubt by potential sponsors to latch on to eSports brands. In actuality, what has transpired in the past several years tells a different story as to how mega companies are latching on to gaming

leagues to help expand coverage and provide advertising for certain leagues and games. In March of 2019, telecommunications giant AT&T officially struck a deal by partnering with the ESL to create a new mobile gaming league. With AT&T committed to eSports and growing its audience, the company is unlocking new ways the media can cover eSports. AT&T is monetizing eSports in a way that is rather unique: AT&T mobile devices to gain a wider eSports audience. Yvette Martinez-Rea, chief executive at ESL Gaming North America, cited mobile use as a target for gaming:

A first in the industry, ESL Mobile Open was developed to provide anyone with a phone access to compete at the highest levels with both established and emerging mobile eSports titles. AT&T is a natural fit for this program with their commitment to innovation in eSports and gaming and by promoting broad access for players of all types and levels. (Carp, p. 5)

VENN eSports Network

Short for Video Game Entertainment and News Network, the VENN eSports Network was announced in 2019 to launch in mid-2020, per ESPN's Jacob Wolf (2019). According to Wolf (2019) VENN is attempting to "compete with the likes of ESL and Cheddar" (p.1). Both the ESL and Cheddar are eSports news platforms where eSports audiences flock to hear the biggest eSports news. VENN wants to provide eSports coverage that is unprecedented and cannot be topped:

VENN will provide 24/7 linear programming and will produce content out of studio in both Los Angeles and New York. The coverage, which is expected to include 55 hours of original programming per week, will include gaming streams, talk shows, documentaries, and live eSports events. The company has

broadcasting deals with Twitch and YouTube and expects to be available on mediums like Roku and Sling, according to the Associated Press. Competitors in the 24/7 eSports broadcasting space are sparse, with ESL running online streams around the clock on Twitch and in certain over-the-top TV offerings. Cheddar, which has its own 24-hour network, also puts together original eSports programming out of its studio in Manhattan. ESPN and Turner started broadcasting eSports in 2015 and 2016, respectively, and run eSports programs throughout the year on both linear and livestreaming platforms. (p.4)

The talk centered around eSports' ability to live on cable and network television has been long discussed. But with major networks such as ESPN and Turner broadcasting eSportsing events on their cable networks, younger audiences are begging to click on those channels more frequently. VENN is allowing itself to test the waters on linear television and online streaming, seeing which platform (or perhaps both) creates the most traction for long-term success. The creation of VENN has been in the works for years, as VENN co-CEO Ariel Horn, a four-time Emmy-winning producer and former global head of eSports content at Riot Games, wants to create a different experience for the audiences:

We've been polishing our craft on global stages for years while dreaming of new ways to create memorable eSports broadcast experiences. VENN will bring together big picture thinking to greater gaming and entertainment content, building a bridge from our industry into the world that surrounds it. (Wolf, p. 4)

Professional Sports Organizations using eSports

One of the strongest buzzwords in the communication field today is '*creator*.' Content creation lands applicants' strong jobs, can impact any given community, brings people together,

and now, showcases eSports teams. A major player in this aspect of eSports is professional basketball teams. Across the league, NBA teams have created NBA 2k eSports teams to compete against other NBA 2k teams. These 2k programs are supported, funded, and promoted by the NBA teams. Professional NBA teams are using NBA 2k as a branch of their organization to help connect with the gaming audience in addition to building lifelong fans.

Individual teams are hiring talented videographers to create content from their eSportsing events and their community engagement projects. Patrick Brouder is the videographer for Cavs Legion, the official NBA 2k League team of the NBA's Cleveland Cavaliers. The coverage for many of these videographers is deeper than surface level. "This is way more than just video games," Brouder (2020) tweeted. Brouder engages with the Cleveland community through monthly CPL Play gaming events. "I love being able to see how close knit the community is here in Cleveland!" Brouder tweeted. By taking photos and creating video content of NBA 2k League eSports players interacting with children in their community through gaming, it shows how gaming can bring people together.

NBA teams are consistently finding new ways to build their NBA 2k League eSports teams, from both a live event production to community engagement projects. However, behind the scenes, collaborators are combining aspects of the NBA together with NBA 2k. Sam Asfahani, former Head of Content with the NBA 2k League and CEO of OS Studios, had a first-hand look at the strategy behind teams making the eSports commitment:

For many brands we work with, eSports is exactly that: a marketing tool for fan acquisition. It's not about selling a product or service, it's about the lifetime value of a fan and how we acquire them. For the NBA, that's easy – they have a fantastic game in NBA 2k, so they have a very authentic position in gaming.

They're not forcing any link. A lot of people enter NBA fandom through playing the video game. That's a successful way to approach video games and eSports because they're high-engagement entry points. It's not surprising that several brands, not just the NBA, see [the 2k League] as an opportunity. (Droesch, p. 12)

With how each individual NBA team is covering its 2k sports teams (mostly through Twitch and YouTube TV) eSports players are gravitating toward engaging with certain NBA teams when they log on to play. NBA teams are making their NBA 2k League content easily available, enticing gamers to the league. Grant Paranjape, Director of eSports Business and Team Operations at Monumental Sports & Entertainment, sees the value and parallel between the NBA and the NBA 2k League:

The NBA 2k League is relatable to a traditional sports audience but is also reaching the hardcore audience that plays video games every day. You see a team like Wizards District Gaming (the NBA 2k team for the Washington Wizards) or Bucks Gaming (Milwaukee Bucks) and you follow the players and storyline (through online streams and video content). When you grow older and need an NBA team to root for – or take your kids to watch – you turn to the NBA [2k League] as that vehicle. (Droesch, p. 13)

Not only are teams endorsing and benefiting from NBA 2k and eSports, but the entire National Basketball Association is endorsing it through broadcasting and advertising. The NBA is attempting to create something never before done in the history of eSports and professional gaming:

The NBA 2k League is the start of something massive in eSports – the merge between traditional, professional sporting leagues and our beloved gaming scene.

Set to have its inaugural season in 2018, the 2k League will see the very best gamers around the world represent 17 of the NBA's top teams in the virtual space. The NBA 2k League was officially announced in February 2017 as a joint venture between the National Basketball Association and Take Two Interactive, publishers of the annual video game franchise NBA 2k. As the first and only professional eSports league advertised managed and endorsed by the NBA, it aims to put the spotlight on the very best NBA 2k players in the entire world and give them the proper platform to show off their skills and love for the sport. (esportbet.com, p. 1-2)

NBA 2k uses both YouTube and Twitch to broadcast its live events. The NBA 2k YouTube page is a hub for creative content as well. They post recaps, best moments, past live broadcasts, and other creative content. The NBA has created a space for traditional sports and eSports to join together and share similarities among core differences the two share. While the eSports events currently live within online streaming and traditional NBA games aired live on national cable television, the gap is being closed in terms of how viewers are able to access content. The NBA has NBA.com as its main website to find all types of content such as videos, interviews, audio clips, and much more. Similarly, the NBA 2k League has its own site at 2kleague.nba.com where it covers its players, news, and changes across the league. By creating similarities between the two, the NBA has drawn more people to the NBA 2k spectrum, creating larger viewership and more engagement.

In all, the media coverage of eSports at the professional level is evolving on a day-to-day basis because of the different platforms available to professionals. The growth of professional eSports as an entity is allowing broadcast companies, individual streamers, traditional sports

franchises, and marketing agencies to link together and create a product built for the future. From professional NBA teams using the NBA 2k League as another tool to lure fans to their market, to mega companies like ESPN buying out the broadcast rights for certain eSports events, there is a level of promise in the professional world. The future may be inherently unknown for professional eSports in terms of how the media is covering the industry, but one thing is certain: eSports will be a major part of the future and there are plenty of interested individuals who are waiting in the wings to cover the fast-rising gaming culture.

Chapter 3: Collegiate eSports Media Coverage

In a move potentially altering the landscape of collegiate eSports, and the media coverage surrounding collegiate eSports, the NCAA's Board of Governors issued a vote in May of 2019 concerning the topic of governing and holding collegiate championships for eSports (Hayward, 2019). The discussions centered around the growth of eSports at the collegiate level and how the NCAA would be able to possibly regulate varsity programs. However, after lengthy discussions the NCAA concluded there is no suitable way to maintain rules and procedures of eSports, thus allowing collegiate eSports to remain an entity of its own (Hayward, 2019).

With this ruling, broadcast companies and streaming services are able to continue operating under free reign of covering collegiate eSports. The significance of a possible ruling in favor of regulating eSports at the NCAA level would have abolished the open nature of the broadcasting market of collegiate eSports. Instead, companies such as ESPN and Turner are able to bid on broadcast rights or host their own collegiate eSporting events while handing out prize money. One of the main concerns for the NCAA in terms of regulating eSports as a varsity championship at the division level is how prize money plays a factor in how participants engage with eSports and how many compete for the prize (Hayward, 2019).

Because there is no current structure of how to handle eligibility due to winners taking home prize money (in most circumstances the NCAA does not currently allow its student-athletes to accept monetary value of any kind while attending a university) broadcast companies, outside players, and donors are able to entice participants with as much prize money as they so choose. If the NCAA were to regulate eSports at the collegiate level under its current format, prize money would no longer be an option for players, thus significantly diminishing the value of collegiate eSports tournaments on a national level. ESPN, Turner, Epic Games, and other eSports broadcast giants would be forced to focus solely on the professional eSports landscape, limiting their audience. For example, ESPN hosted its first Collegiate eSports Championship in Houston in May of 2019. Twenty-two qualified teams from 20 different colleges competed against one another in games such as *Overwatch* and *Street Fight V: Arcade Edition* (Hayward, 2019). The anticipation for the event grew because of a new chapter starting in collegiate eSports. A new and inviting avenue crossed paths with a young audience.

Per ESPN Events (2019) hundreds of schools throughout the entire country tossed their name into the ring during qualifying rounds in an attempt to make the championships:

As universities continue to grow their eSports programs at the varsity, non-varsity and club levels, we're proud to be providing a platform for national exposure and recognition of some of the most talented players in the collegiate space, said John Lasker, vice president of Digital Media Programming for ESPN. Through our collaboration with top publishers in the industry, players will be able to showcase their talent in high-level competition on some of the most prominent eSports titles. (p. 2)

Not only did ESPN broadcast the event, they hosted the event and profited off ticket sales of audience members. ESPN held total control of every aspect of the event, setting a standard for how collegiate eSports events may be held in the future. In this instance, ESPN did not have to outbid any other company for the immediate rights to the event due to hosting it themselves.

In the following sections of this chapter, I will further explore the broadcast rights in collegiate eSports and why broadcast rights are becoming a larger part of eSports gaming. Following a deeper look at broadcast rights, I will dive into hardships the media is faced with concerning covering eSports. In addition, I will detail how individual colleges cover eSports and how they work with networks to gain more coverage, and how academics are tied to furthering the media coverage of collegiate eSports.

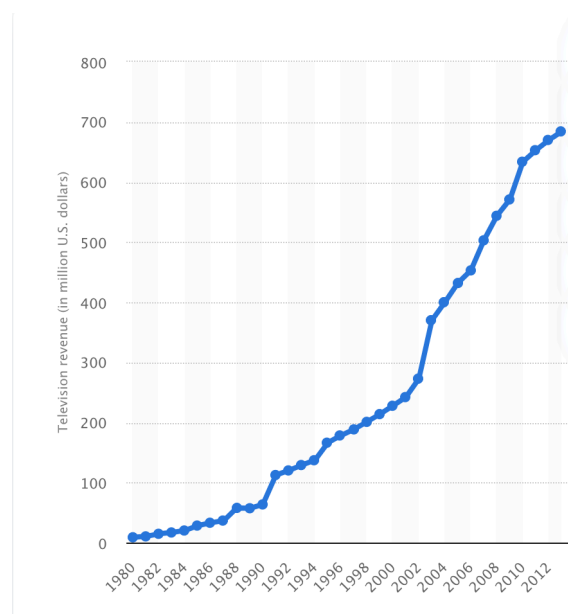
Broadcast Rights

With broadcast rights being a massive income source for traditional sports leagues, like the NFL or MLB (ESPN paid the NFL two billion dollars per season to air the rights to Monday Night Football) it opens the discussion as to how eSports leagues will now handle their broadcast rights if they are not natively hosted by broadcast companies themselves (Bogage, 2019). ESPN's Director of Business Development Kevin Lopes is in charge of ESPN's eSports programming acquisitions and has a firm stance on eSports broadcast rights revenue:

"I don't want to be aggressive here, but I don't know if the media rights are that high, said Lopes when he was asked about media rights accounting for the second largest eSports revenue stream. I would say, to be a little bit critical of some of the reports that are out there, I would challenge that a bit. I'm not sold on media rights driving eSports as aggressively as it was projected to be a couple years ago." (Bogage, p. 6)

If media rights are not a driving force in the collegiate eSports space, it may then be even harder for the NCAA to regulate eSports as a championship. The NCAA would not be able to control the broadcast rights landscape because of the currently vague nature of broadcast rights. In traditional college sports at the Division I level, each conference is allowed to partner with a broadcast company (outside of certain circumstances like the BIG 12, because of the ESPN owned Longhorn Network is in collaboration with the University of Texas) (Cassillo, 2019). Once those deals are set, a portion of that money is sent to the NCAA per the contract agreement between the NCAA and the conferences.

The NCAA is currently profiting at an all-time high from broadcast rights, raking in \$844.3 million dollars from Division I Men's Basketball Championship television and marketing rights alone (NCAA.org, 2019). This dollar amount continues to climb on a year-to-year basis, jumping from under nine million dollars in 1980 to over \$800 million dollars today. Figure 3 below by *Statista* (2013), shows the rapid growth of the NCAA's television revenue, increasing dramatically ever since 2002.



Broadcasting and broadcast rights of traditional sports have been established for decades, allowing for substantial growth from year to year. In large part, the brand recognition of traditional sports within the NCAA has allowed their sponsorship to grow into what they are now: a national leader in sports revenue.

In the instance of eSports, there is currently no exact dollar amount reported on how much broadcast rights cost (especially in collegiate eSports) because of the ambiguity of the broadcast rights process. ESPN and other major companies are indeed running into the topic regarding money spent on broadcast rights, but also how audiences react to the content in front of them, especially at the collegiate eSports level. Because of this, there is no certain way to market, brand, or promote the eSports product that is being held.

Media Coverage Hardships

On one hand, there are the die-hard eSports fans who know the intricacies of gaming. On the other side, casual fans flip to ESPN and see eSports, not knowing what it is or how to understand the thrill of online gaming. Bogage (2019) says industry analysts “remain unconvinced that both publishers and distributors have yet found a method to appeal to both a more general and unfamiliar television audience and a more passionate and game-savvy group streaming online” (p. 10). For instance; in 2015 ESPN aired a collegiate-level battle of *Heroes of the Storm*. This was the first time eSports were broadcast on ESPN’s main channels of ESPN and ESPN2 (Stark, 2015). The tournament consisted of 64 collegiate teams, including UC Berkeley and Arizona State, both members of the Pac12 conference. There were some who enjoyed the airing of the eSports tournament on ESPN, such as current sports broadcaster Bill Walton (2015).

In a tweet, Walton went on to say, “Heroes of the Dorm – I have never been so proud. Go Pac12, no truck stops here. Just reporting the facts.” On the contrary, casual traditional sports

fans such as LeTourneau University assistant men's basketball coach James Wallace (2015) were not as thrilled to see eSports on cable television. "And I thought poker on ESPN was a stretch...now they are showing guys playing World of Warcraft or whatever this game is...what is going on?" With there being a substantial gap between how to broadcast eSports for both audiences, collegiate eSporting events have traditionally been less attractive for companies such as ESPN to broadcast without there being more structure.

While the lack of true structure in collegiate eSports is causing some commitment issues from larger companies and brands to pursue full-time broadcasting rights to events, smaller colleges and universities such as SUNY Canton, have taken the initiative to broadcast events on their own:

Student applications for esports team keep rolling in. Not just to play, either: some are looking to commentate on matches or operate the in-game camera for broadcasts. These secondary roles may not make headlines like pro players do, but these are essential occupations in the esports world, and guiding students to them is another way for schools to justify starting esports programs and teams. (Lumb, 2018)

Lumb also continues to say the school of SUNY Canton continuously has prospective students who want to be streamers and content creators (p. 20). More interest in the technical aspect of eSports such as broadcasting, content creation in terms of video profiles on players, and digital media marketing are advancing eSports at a rapid pace. The online streaming of these events by universities and colleges allow students to not only receive hands on experience but showcase their skills in the broadcast medium. The broadcasts are also providing exposure for these schools, opening more opportunities for the growth of eSports at the collegiate level.

While attempting to draw a parallel to professional eSports and collegiate eSports, the method of broadcasting their own events by schools serves as one of the several differences between professional eSports and collegiate eSports. Professional eSports is guided by thousands (and in many cases, millions) of dollars. Whether raised by the gamer/streamer themselves, or by the broadcast company hosting a tournament, it opens the door for more growth at a quicker pace than at the collegiate level. Schools are forced to work with the small-scale operations they can either afford or are given. There are instances where professional gamers stream their own events, such as Tyler “Ninja” Blevins on Twitch (eSportsPedia, 2019). eSports at the professional level is able to use personal streams to gain a wider audience than at the collegiate level.

Name and brand recognition are one of the primary reasons Ninja is extremely popular. For collegiate eSports, many schools and players at the colleges and universities do not have that brand recognition at this time, making it harder for their content and broadcasts to be seen by a wider audience. While the landscape of collegiate eSports is rapidly changing with new developments each year, the overall world of eSports controls how schools can move forward with their decisions concerning branding, finances, and broadcast equity. “It all depends on where eSports goes and how it evolves, which is completely out of higher education’s control” (Lumb p. 26). The eSports world dictates how schools can move forward, both in regard to players attending the school to become gamers, and the ways schools broadcast their events.

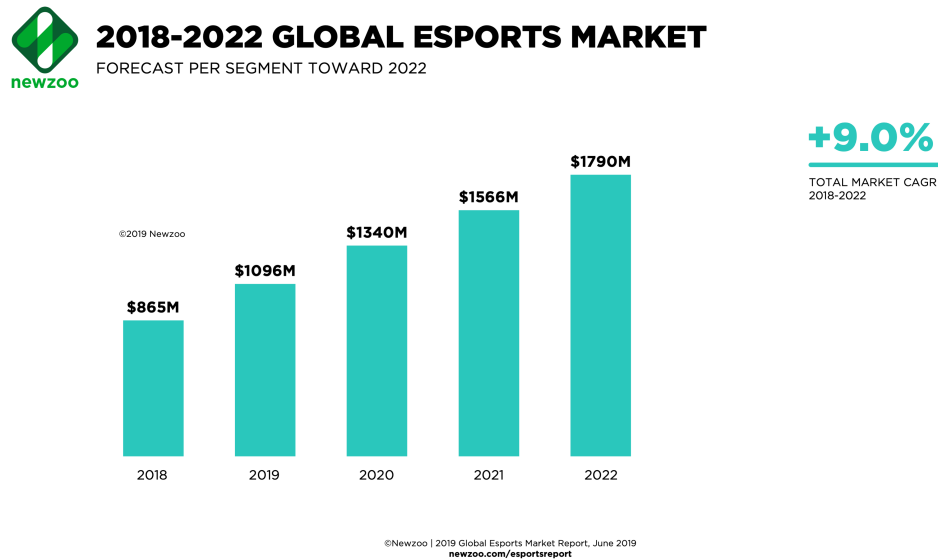
Unless there are professional gamers attending schools (bolstering the school’s viewership) college broadcasts are not currently fully driven by sponsorship dollars and views. Rather, schools seem to be using eSports as a developmental program and training ground to learn how to become a better player, broadcaster, or content creator. The eSports landscape is, in

some ways, working against collegiate eSports players because many pro gamers tend to retire in their early 20s, putting collegiate gamers behind. Because of this, focus on broadcasting and content creation is becoming a popular avenue for colleges to explore for their eSports students (Lumb, 2018). Former eSports players who become eSports broadcasters, media members, and content creators is becoming more and more popular. With their extensive knowledge of eSports, and it being a field where complete knowledge of eSports is needed to broadcast an event, it makes for an attractive option for those former players who are unable to continue playing (Lumb, 2018).

While media giants such as ESPN and Turner are broadcasting select collegiate eSports tournaments (mostly hosted by themselves) colleges by themselves are using smaller scale operations to broadcast their own events to the public. Due to the ease of acquiring equipment needed to stream an event, it is more accessible for colleges to host, broadcast, and promote their own eSports events. Per Andronico (2019), there are only a handful of equipment items needed to stream online, in contrast to the massive investment in production equipment required to complete a traditional broadcast. Two computers, one for gaming and the other for streaming, a Twitch account, streaming software such as XSplit or Open Broadcasting Software (OBS), a mic and cameras complete the basic setup for a live online eSports stream.

If a college is interested in showing the players faces, interactions between the players, and the broadcasters covering the events, they need separate cameras to feed into the consoles. With a one-time purchase needed for these products, colleges are able to affordably produce and broadcast quality online streams without spending a massive amount of money. With the ability to host and broadcast events with this much ease, it has allowed collegiate eSports to grow without the consistent help of traditional broadcast TV, much like how professional eSports grew

into what it is today: over a one-billion-dollar industry as shown in figure 4 (below) provided by Newzoo (2019).



Because collegiate eSports is not yet comparable to traditional college sports (or even professional eSports in terms of finances or reputation), collegiate eSports does not yet consistently live on traditional broadcast television. Instead, online streams such as Twitch and Facebook Live have become the main platform to engage viewers.

Individual College Media Coverage



The students of Ball State Sports Link, a digital sports production concentration offered under the major of Telecommunications, broadcast a live Rocket League tournament at Ball State University in February of 2019 (Kartman, 2019). Several traditional athletes squared off against members of the university's eSports club. Figure 5 (above) per Kartman (2019) shows how the event was broadcast on Facebook Live, using a tricaster (a product that allows the user to merge live video with graphics, audio, and other broadcasting elements to an online stream) with three commentators, several cameras, and audio to support the broadcast.

As I watched the event take place through the Facebook Live stream, I noticed how interactive the broadcast was in terms of seeing the players' reactions in addition to playing the game of Rocket League. Per the Rocket League's official website, the game is "a high-powered hybrid of arcade-style soccer and vehicular mayhem with easy-to-understand controls and fluid, physics-driven competition" (2019). The stream showed the action of the vehicles attempting to take control of the ball and score while showcasing the excitement and engagement from the players, which is a major reason why audiences love to watch eSports:

A big reason why people watch eSports is the social interaction between other consumers of the sport. It has been shown that spectator interaction is a big factor when it comes to traditional sports as well as eSports. Spectators of the sport are generally connected through an online chat where they are able to discuss and react to live matches being played in real time, as a way to cheer for their favorite player or team. (Serranto, p. 4)

Without the help of major broadcast companies, Sports Link was able to showcase the skills of the eSports players while broadcasting a live event to a Facebook Live audience that was looking for that specific content. If collegiate events such as the Rocket League tournament

produced by Sports Link were to air on traditional broadcast, it may not be received as well as it was via online streaming. Ball State is one of many universities moving forward with new ways to broadcast collegiate eSports.

Harrisburg University is also spearheading efforts to host an eSportsing event on their own campus. In an article compiled by Luke Winkie (2019) in *The Atlantic*, he sets the scene as to how Harrisburg is running its collegiate eSports operation:

Two sets of computers are mounted onstage beneath an enormous HD display, promising the attendees that they won't need to invade any personal space to enjoy the games this time around. Harrisburg has hired live broadcasters for Overwatch and League of Legends and hooked them up to a booming sound system to better contextualize the action for the audience. (p. 37)

For one of their tournaments, Harrisburg University collaborated with ABC27 News. The station provided live streaming on its website of not only the Harrisburg University eSports (HUE) Invitational, but the "HUE countdown" as well. Before the match began, the online stream consisted of content such as player feature stories, behind the scenes gaming insight, and tournament publicity (ABC27.com, 2019). The station also ran the countdown specials on over the air broadcast on ABC27-WHTM during the morning hours. In the evening, ABC27 streamed the collegiate event online. The tournament consisted of 64 colleges and university teams from various schools covering the entire country. Teams such as Penn State, Clemson, and Drexel were among the participants. The games played were Overwatch, League of Legends, and Hearthstone. At Harrisburg, it represents the "largest collegiate local area network (LAN) in North America" (ABC27.com, p.4). News stations are constantly looking for new ways to reach

a wider audience and connect deeper with each new generation. Connecting eSports with their online platforms is one area of major growth.

In Idaho, Brian Holmes (2019) covers Boise State eSports for KTVB7 for both online video and written content. Holmes explains the reason why KTVB7 and other news outlets are covering eSports:

Like basketball or football, or any other varsity sport, they [eSports players] play as a team, they compete against other colleges, they have their own broadcast team they call ‘casters,’ and they have a faction of fans and family that fill any empty space in the GamePants Arena. (p.4)

Holmes (2019) also details the day-to-day routine of eSports players and also how eSports launched from a mere starting point to a dominating program on campus. From the start of their program’s launch in 2017 the Broncos have won almost 300 times. In a conversation Holmes (2019) had with Dr. Haskell (who is an educational technology professor and eSports coach at Boise State), Haskell broke down how the university has been successful within its eSports program:

We’ve played more games, we have the biggest broadcasting program associated with our eSports program. We had the first female team captain in collegiate eSports, any year we’re probably the third most-watched program on campus [behind football and men’s basketball].

The “biggest broadcasting program” that is surrounding the Boise State eSports program stems from their ability to market themselves via Twitch. They have over 200,000 unique viewers and over 500 broadcast hours, making them the most active in the country (Holmes, 2019). Because

they are playing more matches than anyone else, their Twitch stream is continuously noticed by people outside of their university.

The University of Akron is one of the first universities in the country to compete at the varsity level, also offering club and recreational gaming programs. Within their program, communications students can broadcast games and provide commentary via online streams (uakron.edu, 2019). However, the university does not limit the students to online broadcast work in regard to eSports. Akron allows its students to contribute as videographers, photographers, and audio experts. Like the majority of schools, Akron does not currently have a linear television network they are partnered with to broadcast eSports events. Without bringing in paid professionals in linear TV to take away opportunities from students, the students are learning how to stream and work hands on with behind the scenes technology. This includes streaming options like Twitch and technology such as tricastors (uakron.edu, 2019).

In an article written by the University of Akron's Communications and Marketing department (2018), they conducted an interview with Michael Fay Jr., the former director and head coach of eSports at the University of Akron. He explained the impact of broadcasting eSports at the collegiate level:

Live eSports broadcasts and video game livestreaming are almost entirely responsible for the rapid growth of the eSports industry. As peak viewership for eSports begins to rival that of conventional sports broadcasts, students who have a depth of experience with the differences in production between the two will have a competitive edge in the job market. (p. 7)

The University of Akron is teaching its students through coursework (a class called Topic in Media Production: eSports Broadcasting), and the university is allowing the students to work hands on with technology to broadcast events on their own (Knisely, 2018). The 3-credit class teaches eSports students how to build live streams on multiple platforms at once, using many camera angles. YouTube, Twitch, Facebook Live, and traditional television are all included in the coursework.

The concept that Akron and many other schools follow falls under covering their own eSporting events more than outside media coverage. With university-controlled eSports Twitch streams and university magazines, schools are able to promote and cover their own eSports quicker and more effectively than outside media. In turn, this gives schools like Akron an advantage in the classroom when teaching their students about the production side of eSports. Juan Contreras, the general manager of [Akron] Zips-TV and professor in the University of Akron School and Communication, assesses why the classwork is important for the evolution of media coverage at the collegiate level:

This class will demonstrate how eSports is a great resource for experiential learning and the development of job skills for media production students. There's a continuing shift in how audiences are being entertained, which is why a lot of programmers are creating content for streaming services. This is a great opportunity for Z-TV students to learn how to cater to contemporary audience habits and sharpen their production skills. (Knisely, p. 5)

The skills gained are practical in many ways for the students at Akron. Not only are they gaining valuable experience upon graduation but learning the business side of media coverage in eSports.

Recent collegiate eSports tournaments have attracted nearly as many viewers as the Super Bowl in the National Football League through viewing online and other venues (Knisely, 2018).

The economic makeup of eSports, combined with learning eSports broadcast and production skills at the collegiate level, are allowing students to see tangible viewership numbers on eSporting events. Viewership of collegiate eSports is gained not only by broadcasting events, but also by creating video content. The Ball State Sports Link program used feature interviews of eSports players to create a different way to cover collegiate eSports. In an article by Alex Kartman (2019), Ryan Pietraszewski, one of the student producers of the Sports Link eSports productions, wants to help create a new perspective of eSports across Ball State's campus:

I want to entertain and inform people all over campus what eSports is really like, and hopefully lay down a good foundation that Sports Link and the eSports club can build off in the coming years. I want to show everyone who may not know much about eSports how exciting and fun to watch they can be. (p.13)

Scholarships

These types of profiles on collegiate eSports are also informing high school students and parents on how eSports can help their child obtain a collegiate scholarship. In 2018, colleges in the United States offered 16 million dollars in eSports scholarships. Even though the 16 million dollars is barely a fraction of the four billion dollars spent on traditional sports scholarships, the figure handed out to collegiate eSports players has tripled since 2015 (McGrath, 2019). McGrath went on to say colleges are moving quickly to broadcast and cover eSports through the media to help recruit eSports players and boost enrollment (p.7).

Colleges are not alone in handing out scholarship money to aspiring collegiate eSports players. Mega eSports company Riot Games is funding League of Legends scholarships all

across the country, covering millions of dollars says Takahashi (2020) in a personal interview I conducted. The company hands scholarship money directly to the colleges that have competitive League of Legends teams (Nelius, 2019). For instance, in January of 2018, Riot Games announced almost \$500,000 in scholarship money for eSports students enrolled at a Big Ten College (Heiweil, 2019). Money given to colleges is allowing the schools to divvy out scholarship money and spend their other allotted funds to other areas of eSports production, such as online streaming and equipment (Takahashi, 2020). In the case of Riot Games and the Big Ten Network, their relationship extends beyond providing scholarship money according to the Big Ten Network's communication department (2018):

The top eight teams will make the BTN League of Legends playoffs. The BTN Champions and runner-up will each earn berths in the play-in tournament and compete for a spot in the League of Legends College Championship. The 2018 BTN season concludes with an online 8-team tournament being held from March 30 – April 2 to determine the champion. BTN will assume all production responsibility for the tournament matches and discusses the best online streaming options. (p.2)

With Riot Games committing a massive amount of dollars to scholarships, they are still waiting for a return on the product according to Takahashi (2020):

The eSports part of Riot Games is still an investment that will pay off later because it is currently not generating as much advertising revenue today as it is projected to make. It is comparable to when mega millionaire Steve Ballmer purchased the Los Angeles Clippers [in 2014]. The Clippers were good but needed something to set them over the edge. He took a chance on the Clippers and

is helping them turn around by signing big players [Kawhi Leonard and Paul George]. Investors are starting to do the same with eSports within advertising and media coverage.

Riot Games first took a chance and developed new content for League of Legends in 2011 due to the demand from consumers for more games. Because of this, Riot Games branded its own eSports leagues and weekly online broadcasts. The company saw the demand from both college students and professional gamers and turned their company into more than just a video game creating company. Riot Games became a company devoted to supplying eSports fans with media coverage of eSporting events concerning their games (Takahashi, 2020). Subsequently, media coverage has expanded.

The Big Ten Network linked with ESL Collegiate (Electronic Sports League) and agreed to an online competition series. This series complemented the Riot Games College League of Legends season (ESL Gaming, 2019). BTN claimed full media rights to stream the tournament online via Caffeine TV, Twitch, and YouTube. According to ESL's Global Chief Strategy Office Craig Lavine (2019), two major reasons to collaborate with the Big Ten Network are to create a bigger following within its online streams and create a stronger bond for collegiate eSports:

We see collegiate eSports playing a crucial role in both the player and fan ecosystems and this marks the second program on the ESL Collegiate platform. The ultimate goal of these collegiate partnerships is to expand awareness of eSports on college campuses as well as establish a consistent structure for collegiate eSports competitions, akin to traditional sports. (p.3)

If collegiate eSports is to draw closer to traditional sports, it needs social support from many areas. According to Takahashi (2020) in a personal interview, media coverage is helping

eSports create a new cultural industry of its own, especially at the collegiate level. More and more people are playing, broadcasting, consuming, and supporting eSports at a higher level than ever before. This is changing how the media covers eSports, and in turn how the public is viewing collegiate eSports:

People who used to be deemed as nerds are no longer being ostracized because of the positive media coverage they are receiving. The so called prototypical traditional sports jocks are not overly dominant anymore. Parents just want their children to be successful. If their child is excellent at video games, or working in the eSports broadcast and production field, and they see from the news or online their child has an opportunity to earn a scholarship for playing video games, they are much more likely to jump on board with the idea. (Takahashi, 2020)

In the case of Takahashi, he covers a variety of news for Venture Beat. His duties include writing about both collegiate and professional eSports. The landscape of eSports media coverage is changing by the month, but Takahashi (2020) continues to write more stories concerning eSports, he said in a personal interview with me:

We [Venture Beat] cover an eSports story every week now, either professionally or collegiately. A couple of years ago that number would have been zero. Teams are coming and rosters are being added, which are investment vehicles for people and companies looking to invest. New businesses are being started in regard to eSports partnerships and advertising. We cover those stories too. (Takahashi, 2020)

Academics and Media Coverage

While much of my study on the media coverage of collegiate eSports has been focused on the broadcast side, the aspect of colleges using eSports media coverage as an academic course is becoming more common. St. John's University holds a similar approach to how they cover eSports. They teach their students about the business structure and academic side of eSports in addition to broadcast elements:

Dr. Hedlund said that St. John's tries to find as many academic connection points as possible. There are plans to offer classes where students learn how to write the code for the games, as well as how to advance in the field as broadcasters, managers, and marketers for eSports. (stjohns.edu, 2019)

With the ability and resources to teach collegiate students about how to become eSports broadcasters, that in turn is creating media coverage by university websites (such as at St. John's) and newspaper outlets. St. John's has academic ties and structure to eSports production and broadcast classes. This allows students to build a skillset necessary to work for professional eSports companies as broadcasters, technology developers, and production assistants. Anthony Narvaez, a student at St. John's, has been able to work on the production side of eSports at the university, helping him gain a wide range of experience and knowledge upon graduation:

When asked where he sees himself five years from now, Anthony hopes to work for a software development company like Blizzard Entertainment. "Now that I have been exposed to the inner working of the machines here, my understanding of how the technology works has increased a hundredfold," said Anthony. (stjohns.edu, p.14)

Blizzard Entertainment is “a premier developer and publisher of entertainment software” (blizzard.com, p.1). Students such as Anthony are able to use their skillset learned from practical experience and academic learning while in college to set themselves on a path to work at companies like Blizzard. In turn, Blizzard pairs with companies like ESPN to provide TV coverage of tournaments such as the Overwatch League. As of 2018 when the deal was struck, it marked the largest agreement for Blizzard (Aiello, 2018). Because of the skills gained at the collegiate level, students like Anthony are then able to join companies like Blizzard working as a software developer, or even join companies like ESPN to participate in media coverage of eSporting events.

Zoe Wong, the manager for the St. John’s University eSports team, said she realized she was not a top eSports player, but wanted to stay involved with eSports in any capacity possible. The skills she gains through academics and collegiate eSports provides her an opportunity to prepare for the industry upon graduation. Via stjohs.edu (2019), Wong also draws parallels between eSports and traditional sports in several different ways, including media coverage:

eSports is just another sport. The only difference is that it is [mostly broadcast on] an online platform. If you look at a day in the life of a League of Legends player, it is going to be similar to that of another athlete. You practice a certain amount per day. You have people making sure you are healthy, and that physically and mentally you are performing at your best. It is also an industry like any other. Everything you see on an athletic team or in a business is present in eSports. It is really important to start educating people (p.15)

Zoe added there is a societal misapprehension about *who* can compete in eSports as well.

There is not only a stereotype about people who play, but about who can play. eSports is inclusive, even though it is generally assumed that gaming and eSports are predominantly male activities. It is for everyone. I can play the same games as anyone else – and I do. (stjohns.edu, p.16)

The lack of females participating in collegiate eSports can be partially attributed to online streaming behavior by male players. Indiana Black joined the Robert Morris University eSports coaching staff for the League of Legends team (Parker, 2017):

The share of negative comments received online because of her gender eventually led her to change her player name and play in secret. “I was called a dyke, cow, and bitch,” Black told Parker. “I’d get comments like, ‘I hope you get breast cancer’; ‘How many STDs do you have?’” (p.15)

This negative gaming culture within collegiate eSports has forced universities to dig further into the Title IX rulebook and help advocate for females in collegiate eSports and seek fair treatment within online streaming. According to Parker (2019) Victoria L. Jackson is a sports historian at Arizona State University and has argued for university eSports programs to push for Title IX “sooner rather than later” (Parker, p. 31):

eSports is incredibly popular and has the potential to become a scholarship-granting and revenue-generating enterprise, Jackson said. [Universities should] consider this question: Do you want to become a leader and develop inclusive policies for other institutions to emulate, or do you want to fall behind others possessing the foresight you lacked? (p. 32)

The culture of harassment of female collegiate players takes place on live streaming platforms such as Twitch through either a message chat room or live commentary by other gamers (Parker,

2017). Black goes on to say that when media outlets cover these types of online harassment situations, female players do not want to be in the spotlight because they don't want to talk about gender or deal with the community commentary (Parker, 2017).

There is much to be decided when it comes to collegiate eSports coverage, mainly due to there being no restrictions on how teams market and cover their events. Collegiate programs have free reign on how they cover their own teams, but through the research done and provided throughout my thesis, the consensus seems to be that collegiate events are going to be mostly covered by individual schools within online streams. There may be traditional TV broadcasts of collegiate events in the future, but the impact of digital and online streams is deeper than linear TV. For students learning the ropes on broadcast crews of eSports, they are working with smaller equipment banks and working on sending feeds to online streams versus traditional broadcast production capabilities. There will be a need for students to be trained in eSports coverage moving forward, and training on campuses across the country is starting to emerge. Who they are working for may be uncertain, but these students will undoubtedly have a hand in eSports media coverage in the future whether it be on a linear TV package or online streaming and digital content.

Chapter 4: Conclusion and The Future of eSports Media Coverage

The future in any industry can be unsettling or unknown. Traditional sports make billions of dollars, but each respective major sport is seeing a drop-off in certain areas. In the case of eSports, the unknown is extremely visible. Concerns such as how does the industry grow, where is the bulk of media coverage coming from, what are media rights going to cost (if much at all) to cover certain events, and much more. This concluding chapter focuses on those topics in addition to looking at eSports broadcast and coverage projections, what the future holds for

YouTube, ESPN and other streaming services, IP delivery changing the traditional broadcast model, how the NBA 2k League model may be setting a standard on how to cover eSports, and how the media coverage of eSports will be monitored in terms of broadcast rights.

The payoff and trajectory of the field is untapped and rising every year. The key word that supports the notion of eSports growth is *interconnectivity*. Interconnectivity is the state of being connected with one another. eSports participants want to engage with one another on levels traditional sports have not yet been able to do. In traditional sports, a viewer is limited to watching the event, talking about the event, and watching post event coverage. eSports differs because it allows people to become users, not just spectators. Andy Miah (2019) believes that eSports is, “the future of all sports” and breaks down why:

While the “real” sports world is still far bigger than the competitive eSports community, eSports is showing supporters a new kind of future. A future where experiences make the most of fans’ desire for interactivity within their leisure experiences. Today’s consumer does not just want to watch or listen, they also want to participate – and eSports integrates these principles into people’s leisure time. The latest transformation that is bringing these two worlds even closer together is the creation of new, virtual reality gaming experiences, which are turning eSports into physically active experiences. Virtual reality may just be the technology that unites the two worlds of sports and eSports which are, otherwise, struggling to find common ground. (Miah, p. 2-3)

Miah believes a way eSports and traditional sports can find a common ground is through the avenue of the Olympic Games. He believes eSports may potentially find a home at future

Olympic Games, ushering in a new way to broadcast, cover, and promote eSports across the globe:

In less than one year, the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games will take place, amid widespread speculation that eSports will find a place on – or at least near – the podium. For example, recently in Tokyo an eSports hotel has just been launched and is expected to be ready for Game time. As well, Olympic partner Intel recently announced an Olympic-Sanctioned eSports tournament taking place days before the Games open. (Miah, p. 8)

If eSports are gaining the same amount of coverage at events such as the Olympic Games as traditional sports, the ability for eSports to become even larger is going to rise exponentially.

Is IP Delivery the Future?

The current eSports world broadcasts mainly from two different sources: cable TV productions and online streaming services. While those two types of productions have been the dominant sources of eSports broadcasts, there is another potential option waiting in the wings to aid traditional broadcast companies. In *Is IP delivery the future for broadcasting eSports* by Alana Foster (2019), Corey Smith, who is the director of live operations broadcast technology for the mega company Blizzard, said that, “We can’t operate in a world where we are earning all that back end budget and so we are looking in the future of IP,” (Foster, p. 6). Foster further breaks down what Smith does and his importance to the eSports broadcast spectrum:

Smith leads a team that is building the next generation of cloud encoding and distribution systems for Activision Blizzard eSports, which operates big data centers around the world. His primary focus is on the global broadcasting of

Overwatch League. Smith says that, “Other partners in the [eSports] ecosystem need to be on the same page.” (Foster, p. 7-8)

The argument made by Smith and by others in the eSports landscape is there needs to be more engagement in eSports through the use of better technology. Foster continues by saying:

eSports experiences for audiences need to be lean, engaging and capitalize on the best new technology to manage the live feeds and offer cool experiences. In order for broadcasters and platform owners to increase the revenue experience they need to harness data management, automate updates and display a list of data points to enrich the experience outside the event. [We need to] broadcast the eSports events live and grow the experience into a festival so that fans can have a great experience outside of the arena. Smith points to the success of Twitch, he added: “The Twitch broadcast rethought how we brought single path streams from the venue and by splitting the production technology and using IP. We are inserting those stories for our casters to tell us onstage and then we can compare in real-time the delivery potential. It’s all very similar to traditional sports broadcasting but fans have all the stats at their fingertips. (Foster, p. 9-12)

Using IP workflows and creating content through this new medium may be an easier method for streamers and broadcasters. In Foster’s (2019) article, she mentions ESL director of eSports broadcasting Simon Eicher and how he sees users being able to use IP workflows:

“Most of the productions are very complex these days with one on one gaming in the whole production line,” Eicher added. “Technology moves so fast, you must keep up with the standards because the viewing experience is super important.”

The viewing experience (interconnectivity) is imperative to the growth of eSports. Using IP is the next wave of being able to generate exciting eSports content. In short, IP delivery in regard to eSports broadcasting is based around the idea of sending broadcast-quality signals from a company's location to the eSport user's location. Instead of using remote trucks or on-site control rooms to broadcast eSports events, companies like Riot have turned to IP delivery for effectiveness and practicality, says Letson (2019):

Remote trucks have essentially been eliminated from Riot's production workflow, a transition to an at-home paradigm that has been accelerated by the recent introduction of various solutions from a handful of manufacturers. That transition has also been driven by Riot's simple philosophy: "We try to keep as many people home as possible so they can sleep in their beds," says audio engineer Dave Talavera, a veteran of the broadcast industry who worked for NFL Films during the early 2000s. Consequently, the audio production mix is handled from Los Angeles. On-site cameras can be controlled, switched and shaded from Riot's facility, and the director calls the show from L.A. Video packages created by Riot's L.A. producers are played back during the show from the facility. While players are looking at their own game on their individual screens, three observers at Riot L.A. can position themselves anywhere within the game, following along and selecting action for replay in the broadcast within the system, without

disturbing the competitors, in addition to also feeding segments to EVS (a form of replay system commonly used in broadcasting) for replay. (p. 11-12)

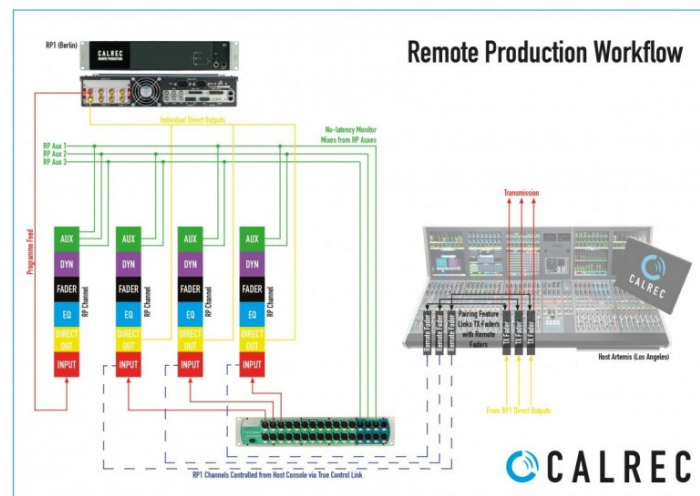


Figure 6 (above via Letson, 2019) shows the setup of the remote audio production workflow and how much simpler broadcasting with IP delivery is. Without having the massive production from a traditional broadcasting truck, companies are able to use these simple switches in their own buildings. Companies can save thousands of dollars a year on travel expenses alone for their employees by keeping them in-house.

Will YouTube take over eSports streaming?

To end the month of January in 2020, three mega eSports leagues pledged their allegiance to YouTube. The *Call of Duty* League, *Overwatch* League, and *Hearthstone* have all tabbed YouTube as their new platform. Not only does this hurt Twitch and its ability to attract young viewers and players, it creates a new line of thinking toward eSports streaming. YouTube is creating more effective ways to stream and create content while bolstering its reach among younger eSports audiences (D'Anastasio, 2020). Activision Blizzard, who owns all three of the aforementioned leagues, took the leagues to YouTube for a larger paycheck. Previously, Twitch owned the steaming rights to *Overwatch* League since 2018 after it forked out 90 million dollars to broadcast the league. To compare, ESPN paid one billion dollars to the National Football

League to broadcast Monday Night Football this year alone (Easterbrook, 2020). The official financial terms of the deal by YouTube has not yet been released, but the feeling of eSports content domination is certainly in play for YouTube. Head of YouTube Gaming Ryan Wyatt proclaims buying the rights to these three leagues has been in the works for quite some time for YouTube (D’Anastasio, 2020). Wyatt also said there should be no issue in terms of the transition of content platforms:

While Wyatt declined to comment on the financial terms of the deal, he does say he doesn’t believe the transition to YouTube will impact the leagues’ viewership. He cites the success of the 2019 *League of Legends* World Championships on YouTube, where, Wyatt says, the platform had more peak concurrent viewers than anywhere else. Wyatt adds that *Call of Duty* has always been hugely successful on the platform. “We have 200 million logged-in users watching gaming content every single day on YouTube,” says Wyatt. (p. 6)

StreamElements CEO Doron Nir added to Wyatt’s comments, vouching for why YouTube is in a position of strength:

Esports tournaments have two types of viewership: Live and VOD (video on demand) post game. Since most of VOD happens on YouTube already, I expect the move to YouTube for live viewership will have no negative impact on the views. If YouTube promotes it properly, it might even get more viewership. (D’Anastasio, p. 7)

YouTube is home to over two billion users each month, accounting for hundreds of millions of hours of content each day (Leskin, 2020). Starting in 2005, YouTube has risen to

power under Google's leadership. Since then, Google has become a worldwide powerhouse, including in the eSports field.

Google also gets the benefit of hosting Activision Blizzard's massive infrastructure on its cloud, a significant win as the company continues to try to both compete with Amazon Web Services and demonstrate its gaming chops after Google Stadia's rocky start. (D'Anastasio, p. 8)

Stadia was Google's first attempt to make its mark in the eSports spectrum. It was based around the idea of part game console, part streaming service. It was Google's intention to charge a ten-dollar subscription fee in return to "stream PC-quality games to practically any device that can run a web browser" (Grey, p. 2). However, when Stadia did not reach the potential it projected it to, Google turned its attention to YouTube for eSports. While there are major victories for YouTube's transactions to acquire top eSports gaming leagues, there are also downsides to it, writes D'Anastasio (2020):

One widespread complaint—on top of having to navigate to another website—about YouTube's streaming platform is that it's not as developed as Twitch's, especially as it pertains to chat. Over the years, Twitch chat has cultivated its own culture, including its own particular memes, emotes, and chants. Inklings of it persist on YouTube, but the platform doesn't have the history. Twitch also offered in-game skins and prizes for esports fans who integrated their online game presences with their Twitch accounts. Wyatt shared that, in the future, it's "very much on our roadmap" for them to offer rewards for *Call of Duty* and *Overwatch* League viewers. (p. 10-11)

YouTube is not the only streaming service companies and individual players are jumping to, but it is also becoming one of the strongest platforms, says Rachel Kaser (2020):

This is a pretty big shift, as Activision inked a livestreaming deal with Twitch in January 2018. That two-year deal is now up, and it appears Activision wasn't satisfied enough with the results to renew. One of the driving forces behind the deal was Twitch's level of viewer engagement, and it remains to be seen if that can be duplicated on YouTube. But other than that, it appears to be an advantageous deal, especially for YouTube. (p. 4)

Content surrounding eSports is readily available either post game, in game, or pregame on YouTube. Players, companies, and media brands post their eSports content to YouTube whether or not they have a partnership with YouTube due to its free-flowing nature. Companies such as ESPN use YouTube to post its eSports content to a video on-demand site. Naturally, that allows YouTube to already have a competitive advantage in the eSports streaming industry. With new ways to stream and to present content to its eSports audiences, Remer Rietkerk, the head of eSports at *Newzoo*, elaborates as to why the eSports streaming business is changing because of the action to grow the eSports business in an article written by Dean Takahashi called *Newzoo: Global eSports will top \$1 billion in 2020, with China as the top market*:

The market is also maturing in entirely new ways, with innovative revenue streams starting to develop, such as streaming and digital goods. These are new ways to monetize that are not available to traditional sports; they also demonstrate a growing understanding of the competitive advantages eSports has over [traditional] sports. These revenue streams have become pioneering ways for teams, organizers, and publishers to grow the business. (Takahashi, p. 14)

With YouTube as an affiliate of Google, it provides them a massive advantage as far as marketability with “digital and streaming goods” as Takahashi points out. With advantages in advertising, money, and potentially streaming services, Google and YouTube are putting their chips forward in the eSports market, states Joost van Dreunen in an article written by Gerrit De Vynck. Van Dreunen is the managing director of Nielsen’s video-game research:

In 2020, Google is going all out to claim a piece of the \$120 billion games market. Google is off to a great start to building strong relationships with content creators which it will need to differentiate as it tries to penetrate the industry via different avenues. The longer Amazon remains on the sideline of technological shifts in the games business, the harder it will be to capture share down the line.

(De Vynck, p. 4-5)

De Vynck (2020) further illustrates the idea of how these eSports leagues are going to make money in the future and how broadcast rights are going to play a factor moving forward for YouTube and other streaming entities:

The deal offers a strong boost to the central thesis of Activation’s eSports efforts. The publisher pitched investors on the Overwatch League and the Call of Duty League, which launches later this month [January 2020] as eSports equivalents to traditional sports leagues like the National Basketball Association [NBA] or National Football League [NFL]. Selling media rights to companies like YouTube is a central piece of how these leagues make money. (p. 6)

Is Activision the ESPN of eSports? And Future Broadcast Rights

ESPN is the mothership of traditional sports and has dipped into eSports with its content creation, online streaming, and overall eSports coverage. However, Activision Blizzard is

beaming with potential to become the “ESPN of eSports” as Luis Sanchez (2020) of TMFTomahawk states:

Activision appointed Steve Bornstein, a former CEO at ESPN, to lead the new media division. Mike Sepso, an eSports industry pioneer, also joined the effort. In 2016, Activision took its commitment to building a broadcasting business around eSports one step further by acquiring Major League Gaming (MLG), a leading online broadcaster in the field. With the MLG acquisition, Activision Blizzard now has the technological infrastructure to organize and broadcast major events. MLG has already shown off its capabilities. For the 2019 *Overwatch* championship tournament, the company was able to fill the Barclays Center in Brooklyn with fans and broadcast some of the matches on traditional TV networks, including ESPN, Disney XD, and ABC (all owned by Disney), in addition to streaming on the MLG website. (p. 4-5)

The final sentence in the above comment is an eye-opening statement and serves as a major reason why Activision could become its own ESPN of sorts. While Activision was partnered with Twitch, the company was still streaming to its own online broadcaster in MLG. The terms of Activision’s new deal with YouTube has not been fully released, thus keeping the door open on the possibility Activision will be able to stream its leagues on YouTube and its own MLG host website. This example proves just how delicate the broadcast rights landscape in eSports is, and how unregulated it is.

As Newzoo (the leading provider of market intelligence covering eSports and a trusted source of eSports news) states on its website in an article titled *The 5 Factors Defining the Future of eSports*, the current and future state of eSports broadcasting is uncertain:

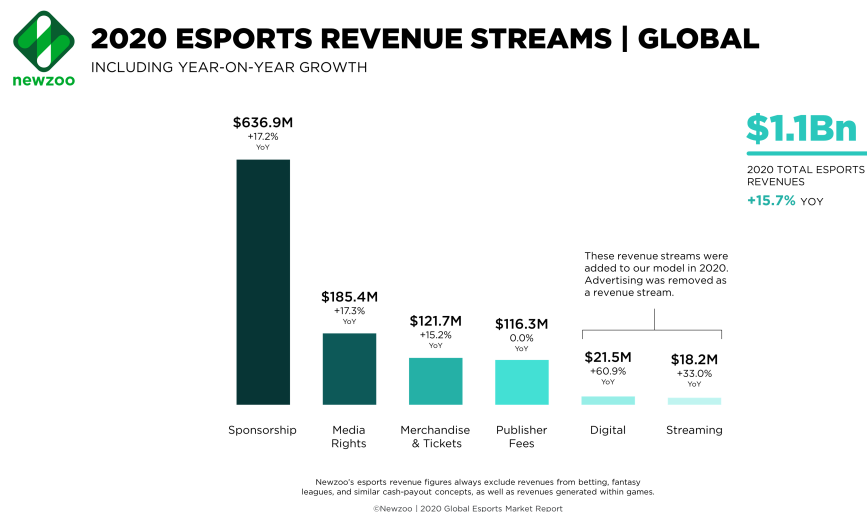
One of the larger regulation voids in eSports is the current structure around content rights. As of now, it is uncertain who owns the rights to [some of the] eSports content. Games played during events are owned by publishers or the event organizers, while videos made by fans and streams that contain game content are owned by the fans and streamers themselves. Thus far, content rights have not really been a focus for publishers, as fan-generated content has served as free advertising for their games. As direct eSports revenues grow, this may change. (p. 12)

Since this article was published in 2019, the aforementioned deal YouTube signed with Activision to exclusively broadcast The *Call of Duty* League, *Overwatch* League, and *Hearthstone* has taken place. This is one of the many first steps to take place in the broadcast rights ecosystem of eSports. Riot Games is another major player in eSports and has 13 eSports leagues around the world for League of Legends. However, League of Legends has been broadcast on more than 30 separate mediums. These include ESPN+, Twitch, Facebook, and more (Smith, 2020). League of Legends is one of the most popular games in eSports and even it does not have a consistent home of where it broadcasts. Traditional sports have come a long way in regard to broadcasting rights, such as the National Football League striking deals with television companies like CBS, FOX, and NBC for 27 billion dollars over a nine-year contract to broadcast football games. This leads to optimism that the future in eSports will too become steadier, but as Newzoo explains, broadcast rights as simple as traditional sports in the future won't come without facing potential issues:

Local and global media rights for esports are unclear and limit the entry of competitive gaming into traditional media and the amount of money potentially

connected to it. This is in contrast with traditional sports, where the sale of broadcasting and media rights is the biggest source of revenue for most sports organizations, generating the funds to finance major sporting events, refurbish stadiums and the continuing development of sports. Of course, nobody owns a sport like baseball or football. The fact that companies like Riot Games own the game that is played makes eSports a more complex ecosystem. In the traditional media space, media rights are sold country-by-country, maximizing local and global revenues. For esports, this structure may not be possible for many reasons.

(p. 13)



In figure 7 (above), *Newzoo* displays the exact dollar amount for the largest eSports revenue streams. While this chart is global and not limited to domestic eSports products, it contains numbers eSports companies, broadcast partners, and streamers constantly monitor. Media rights are the second leading source of revenue in all of eSports. Even with the dollar amount increasing to an all-time high of 185.4 million dollars, it remains a far cry from the over 600 million dollars produced by sponsorships.

The mere fact eSports is set to generate over 1.1 billion dollars in 2020 is an incredible feat alone, but figure 7 (above) perfectly illustrates how media rights revenue is hardly the main source of eSports revenue. Streamers, whether it be single streamers on Twitch, YouTube, ESPN+, Mixer, or other platforms, can turn to sponsorships to gain revenue needed to support their product. Unlike traditional sports, media rights are not funding an entire sector of eSports. That power still remains with sponsorships. Even as the secondary source of revenue, media rights do not currently hold a massive advantage over the likes of merchandise and ticket sales or publisher fees. However, since 2018, the dollar amount tied to media rights has increased from 160 million dollars as *Newzoo* reported in 2019 in figure 8 (below).

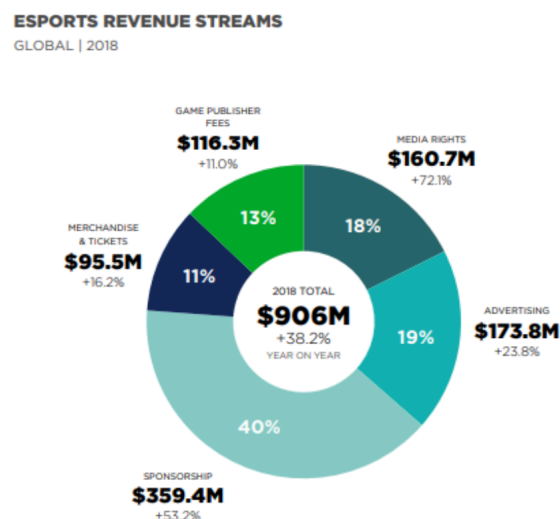











Image Source: [Newzoo](#)

Even though the rapid growth in media rights fees in 2020 has not yet been what *Newzoo* projected in 2018, the number is rising on a yearly basis. In 2018, the estimated rise of eSports media rights as a revenue source stood to double from the mark of 160 million by 2021 (Influencer, 2018). According to Hilary Russ (2019) of Reuters, *Newzoo* reported eSports revenue streams have nearly tripled since 2015, which bodes well for the next several years of eSports media rights growth even though the growth from 2018 to 2020 was less than originally

expected. Josh Chapman (2019) a writer for *Medium* suggests there needs to be more balance when media rights are being discussed. He touches on the 2018 Twitch deal I discussed earlier, as Twitch owned the streaming rights to *Overwatch* League after it dished out 90 million dollars to broadcast the league. Chapman disagrees with the deal, saying Twitch's 90-million-dollar price tag for a couple of seasons to own the rights to *Overwatch* league is not worth it:

We believe that streaming platforms are mispricing eSports media rights deals when considering ad-revenue projections & viewership. At a minimum, these deals need to break even, and we have concluded through our process that the first major media rights deal in eSports (OWL, or *Overwatch League*, with Twitch) was mispriced. We estimated that Twitch paid more per season for the OWL (\$45M/season) than *Overwatch* as a game generated in total ad-revenue for Twitch (\$27M). OWL comprises only ~ 30% of Twitch *Overwatch* viewership and is therefore worth about ~ \$8.2M/year. If exclusive media rights are going to be the norm, the pricing of these contracts needs to more accurately reflect the potential ad revenue for that [specific] eSports league. (Chapman, p. 19-21)

Chapman and his team at Medium have created an ad-revenue model that is able to predict what the media rights future will be for each eSports league. Figure 9 (below) via

	Ad Revenue (Est)	% of Hours Watched
	\$1,000,000,000	894,383,280
	\$115,303,322	11.53%
	\$100,905,663	10.09%
	\$48,643,132	4.86%
	\$40,862,888	4.09%
	\$27,669,211	2.77%
	\$26,090,535	2.61%
	\$24,590,222	2.46%
	\$19,853,361	1.99%
	\$11,483,125	1.15%
Rest of Twitch	\$584,598,541	58.46%

Chapman (2019) displays how much revenue each major league will bring in and how it may affect media rights in the future. He states that the “revenue is an estimate while viewership data is from TwitchTracker. Chapman’s (2019) reasoning stems from several different points, but focuses on the idea media rights deals are coupled with generated revenue:

Media rights deals are directly related to the projected amount of revenue a platform can generate from being the exclusive channel/stream for an event.

While there are indirect revenues (new users) for Twitch that are hard to estimate without more sensitive data, the most important revenue for a media rights contract will come from advertising, just like traditional sports. (p. 8)

ESPN Moving in a New Direction

While YouTube has certainly strengthened its grip as a dominant eSports streaming platform, ESPN continues to build a sizeable eSports voice. Previously throughout my thesis, I have provided examples on what ESPN has done in the past and is currently doing. This consists

of broadcasting select events on traditional television platforms such as ABC, ESPN and ESPN2. I have also explored the concept of ESPN using ESPN+ to stream eSports events through their own streams or pulling from Twitch/YouTube streams, and the written content aspect of ESPN. However, this chapter provides a further analysis into how ESPN may be looking to change its model of eSports coverage. This section heavily focuses on a personal interview I conducted with ESPN eSports Video Producer and Host, Daniel Collette.

Collette, who just recently graduated college in 2018, was hired in November of 2019 as ESPN's first west coast eSports video producer. He creates content in Los Angeles, but travels all across the world to provide coverage of eSports on ESPN's digital platforms. In hiring Collette for the position, it marks a new era for ESPN's eSports coverage. Collette shares what his role with ESPN entails and what ESPN is looking to do in the future:

As a member of the ESPN eSports team, we are entirely a digital team. Our content is never on TV, it is exclusively for YouTube, Twitter, and stuff like that. When you do see eSports on ESPN television platforms, it doesn't have anything to do with our digital content team and it's a licensing deal ESPN has. ESPN isn't putting on any events at the moment. So for the past couple of years you were able to watch things like the Overwatch League on ESPN3 and ESPN+ every other week and that was Blizzard sending the feed to ESPN. Our pursuit is entirely digitally focused and we are actually one of the digital only teams within all of ESPN. By that I mean a team that makes content exclusively for social and nothing else. It's a unique approach for the company itself with ESPN being more of a TV and linear company in the past. Now starting to explore new ways to cover things differently, in terms of a digital approach for something that warrants

attention, like eSports. With ESPN hiring me, we are first and foremost trying to level up our eSports production value. Digital eSports was a small section of ESPN before I was hired. But now, we are attempting to establish a nationwide presence. We want to be a major player in the space for news coverage just like we are for traditional sports. We have only been covering eSports on a digital platform with video for a year and a half.

Collette continues to dive into the eSports structure at ESPN and other companies, explaining that “companies are doing less corporate of eSports” than they did before. Meaning, big companies such as ESPN and Turner are shying away from broadcasting their own eSports events on linear television and moving to almost an entire online platform. Because of this transitional phase of moving digital, Collette says there probably won’t ever truly be a long-term eSports TV network that thrives under the current climate:

Everything lives on digital. Either on Twitch or YouTube, or ESPN digital. eSports is going to continue blowing up on digital. The age range of audiences watching have known eSports to be an online medium. It’s been tested, and it’s hard to eSports fans, players, and the community to get behind traditional TV eSports because they are used to it all being digital. The ways in which we watch [eSports] online as digital will change, but I don’t ever see it going away from digital.

As the traditional sports world has seen, ESPN is more than capable of spending money to commit to the success of a product it wants to pursue. eSports is no different for ESPN. There is not a certain amount of money each year being spent by ESPN to cover eSports on its digital platforms, but as Collette stated, this is the beginning of a new wave of eSports coverage in

which ESPN is looking to be the “World Wide Leader in eSports” just as they have been coined the “World Wide Leader in Sports” for decades. In an interview I conducted with NBA 2k League broadcaster, writer and host Jeff Eisenband, he agreed with the notion that every form of eSports content will be digital soon. In the next section, I further explore how the NBA 2k League is changing eSports coverage and what it means in accordance with traditional sports.

NBA 2k League’s eSports Coverage Impact

Much like the previous section with ESPN, I will focus on the NBA 2k League and its coverage through a personal interview with Eisenband. Earlier in my thesis, I examined how the NBA 2k League is changing media coverage and why it has an impact on eSports. As the NBA 2k League enters its third year, the league is focusing its attention on digital content and the ability to reach the younger audience, tending to shy away from traditional television. As touched on previously, Eisenband completely agrees with the idea eSports content will virtually all live on digital platforms, including the NBA 2k League:

Especially in the NBA 2k League, every form of content is soon going to be digital. Traditional TV legitimizes older generations but takes away younger generations. The end of millennial generations and GEN Z is not watching linear television. You are actually going away from a massive target audience in the younger generations by putting these events on linear television. In the future, we are looking at an all online eSports following. During eSports games, fans can click on widgets to show live stats and notes, you can’t get that on traditional live TV. If you are on Twitch or on YouTube, there is a comment section right there. When we are broadcasting the NBA 2k League on Twitch, we are also engaging with questions from the fans. We are connecting with them.

Eisenband delves into the aspect of broadcasting these events for online, too. There is a certain way companies (like the NBA 2k League) can broadcast to engage their audiences more and allow a stronger flow of audience traffic. In turn, this helps with marketing and advertising. In terms of HOW a company broadcasts events online to reach the younger audiences, in terms of the language used to talk about the eSports games and how commentators speak during the broadcast, this is where a gray area exists says Eisenband:

In terms of live commentary, there are different areas of eSports: fighting games, sports, first person shooters, arcade style... and more. The fans are not all the same for all eSports. For example, in NBA 2k games, we have to broadcast to appeal to hardcore gamers of NBA and 2k. But we also have to hit home to casual fans. If you know basketball, you know how the game works. But if there is a certain achievement a player in the game connects on and needs a deeper look at things casual fan may not know, it's something we try to touch on and explain since it is important.

The business side of the NBA 2k League, and the broadcasting associated with it, is also a budding medium in the eSports industry. According to Eisenband (2020) there are 23 NBA 2k teams, 22 of which are NBA affiliates. Adam Silver, the commissioner of the NBA, has called the NBA 2k League the NBA's fourth league, showing how important it is. These NBA 2k League affiliates make public appearances, practice, and live within their local markets. For example, if an NBA 2k League player competes for 'Pacers Gaming' he or she will live in Indiana and attend live events, and practice in Indiana. Where things become intriguing is how the NBA 2k league operates. According to Eisenband, the league is a joint venture with the NBA and Take-Two Interactive.

Take-Two Interactive is the developer of NBA 2k and each own 50 percent of the league. So the 2k League is being built by the NBA who has already developed three successful leagues (NBA, WNBA, and G-League) and it gives the NBA 2k League a lot of monetary support. A lot of eSports do not have that luxury. The game developers create their games and there is no runway. The NBA 2k League has the luxury to operate at its own pace, it's not going bankrupt. It's a global organization. As other big sports leagues start to invest in eSports, it's going to help them too.

With the financial backing from the NBA, the NBA 2k League is able to provide more coverage with Twitch and YouTube streams. The NBA social accounts are also sharing content posted by eSports teams within the NBA, creating an opportunity for traditional sports fans to see eSports content, perhaps drawing them into the NBA 2k League. This also provokes companies like ESPN, Cheddar, Complex, and other media outlets to share the NBA 2k Leagues content. Even NBATV is starting to pick up some of the content (Eisenband, 2020). But Eisenband also says it is important to know that the NBA 2k League is not a marketing arm of the NBA. But when you are talking about the business model of how to market the team and create ad-revenue to help with broadcasting and other outlets, teams are able to use employees on staff with the NBA teams and transition them to the NBA 2k League.

The conclusion of my conversation with Jeff centered around the idea of companies and streamers needing to understand who their audience is and how to cater toward them to be successful:

I think people get caught up in thinking all eSports are together. But if you are an NBA fan, someone may come up to you and say, 'Well you like the NBA so you

must love cricket' and it just doesn't work that way. They are two completely different sports, just like eSports have different games. So you have to broadcast to that.

Final Thoughts

After researching and speaking with individuals in eSports, it is evident the future points toward digital and online media platforms taking control of eSports media coverage. I began this thesis with two research questions:

R1: How is media coverage evolving at the professional level?

R2: How is media coverage evolving at the collegiate level?

In my research, there emerged six overarching topics I explored in my thesis that helped answer my two research questions:

T1: Where is the bulk of media coverage coming from?

T2: What are media rights going to cost?

T3: What does the future hold for YouTube, ESPN and other streaming services?

T4: How does IP delivery break the traditional broadcast model?

T5: How can the NBA 2k League model set a standard on how to cover eSports?

T6: How will media coverage of eSports will be monitored in terms of broadcast rights?

Each of these six topics has been evaluated throughout my thesis, and stem from my two original research questions.

All six topics were covered in different sections throughout the professional eSports media coverage chapter. Each of them present new challenges, but also enhance eSports media coverage at a whole in some form or another. The bulk of media coverage is coming from online and digital platforms at the professional level, while media rights fees for specific events have

not yet been established at a normal rate. The future for YouTube, ESPN, and other streaming services is extremely bright. Especially for YouTube. YouTube, owned by Google, now hosts three of the largest eSports gaming tournaments: *Call of Duty*, *Overwatch*, and *Hearthstone*. This has allowed YouTube to gain control of a massive audience in addition to already housing a vast majority of video on demand content. ESPN is breaking its traditional mold and supplementing its broadcast coverage of eSports with a larger digital footprint, covering events, players, and teams from all across the globe on social media. IP delivery is fairly new, but companies are starting to use it to cut travel costs and save budget money for other areas of their respective companies. The NBA 2k League is opening doors for professional eSports players by providing a strong platform to game on. The streaming service and media coverage it attracts from YouTube, Twitch, ESPN, and other media outlets makes it one of the largest eSports platforms.

At the collegiate level, only a couple of these topics were answered, mainly due to the restrictions colleges have on their productions. Topics one, two, three, and six mostly have an answer to them at the collegiate platform. The bulk of media coverage is coming from universities using their own Twitch streams and colleges promoting their broadcasts. There are media outlets writing stories, covering college events with video content, and interviewing coaches and players about tournaments and the player's experiences. Mega companies like ESPN have broadcast collegiate events on linear TV channels but have started to pick up those events through their online ESPN+ package, sometimes simply pulling a university's Twitch or YouTube stream and casting it on their streaming service. Media rights costs have mostly been a non-factor at the collegiate level for eSports broadcast (unless companies such as ESPN host an event and make money off a tournament they host) due to the ambiguity of the industry and there not being a set amount to pay per event, unlike traditional sports where companies are in a

bidding war to claim coverage of an event. Colleges are going to heavily benefit from streaming platforms in the near and far away future because of the availability of online streaming. The demand for online content, especially at the college level with students eager to consume eSports content online, is going to rise, giving colleges a chance to bolster their presence on services such as Twitch, YouTube, and ESPN+.

The evolution of media coverage in eSports has changed substantially; starting on a written medium in the 1970s and eventually evolving to digital streaming and linear television broadcasting. But as Jeff Eisenband and Daniel Collette spoke to, the eSports industry is trending back toward exclusively living online after dabbling with linear television media coverage. While it may take time for advertising, marketing, and ad-revenue from online broadcasting to catch up with other money makers in the eSports industry, there are plans in place for companies, like YouTube, ESPN, and Twitch, to build a strong digital presence to earn revenue off online broadcasting and digital reporting. This is not to say there is no room for growth within linear TV for eSports once the younger generation becomes older. However, the likelihood of millennials, generation Z, and the following generations to look toward linear TV as their main source of eSports content is slim due to the nature of eSports coverage being so accessible online.

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